

2007 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

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Cancer Essay

Howard Cabiao

During the summer of 2003, I plunged into a two week nightmare. I felt robbed of my dreams and my hopes for sharing another year with my grandfather, or at least to utter the words of goodbye. On July 28th, 2003 my grandfather, Pantaleon Cabiao, passed away just a day after his birthday, from Prostate Cancer. The story I will share with you will be written in the best way that I can, although no one will ever understand how powerful my grandfather was in my life or how sorrowful this journey has been without him in my life.

I was given only two weeks to encapsulate the entire notion of the first person in my family to have cancer. My family has always been intimate. The word cancer was foreign to our vocabulary. I only saw glimpses of what it was in the news and in my health textbook. In some way, I thought I was immune to getting cancer, for my family to develop cancer, or to even see the first person in my immediate family die from it.

Death was also a term I was very unfamiliar with. At only fourteen years of age, I had only experienced the death of animals I raised. I have never been to a funeral. In my mind I internalized my grandparents would never leave me. I knew they were getting older as years passed. However, I would have never imagined to have death come pull my grandfather away from me so soon.

My grandfather has been my best friend. He taught me how to hold a pencil and to write my name. He taught me how to be a leader, emphasizing our ancestor lineage of warriors. He taught me how to be a man and for that I will always be thankful.

In 1999, my grandparents retired and they moved to Moses Lake. My grandfather was a very muscular individual. He exercised daily while he tended the family farm. He ate organically grown vegetables from his crops and in 2003, was only seventy-two years old.

Almost every other weekend of the month, my family would drive three and a half hours from Seattle to Moses Lake to see him. I could remember his smile, as it gleamed with one missing tooth, as we pulled up on the Ranch driveway every other Friday evening. He was strong, intelligent, comical and loved discussing politics. He was the best grandfather figure I could ask for.

In the first week of June, we were awakened with a call with my grandmother's worried tone. My grandfather had suddenly fell from his bed while getting up to go to the bathroom, and was rushed to the hospital because he was paralyzed from the waist down. The entire family was shocked and confused because we all knew of his great health habits.

They performed emergency surgery that night to remove the tumor in his back. The next morning when we arrived, his doctor informed us he had cancer and it was

terminal. They warned us he only had a few months to live and our hearts sank to the floor. My grandfather smiled as we walked towards him. He assured us this will all pass. He told us sternly to be strong and to pray because prayer is the strongest form of medicine. I continued to pray days on end.

The beginning of the school week, I could not focus on my academics. I was worried for my grandfather and just the thought of losing him caused me to be in denial. I rejected the thought of his passing and ignored the chatter going on at home. That week was the longest week of my life. I feared for his life. Soon, I started to ponder about my own life and how temporary our lives on this Earth really are. I started to rationalize maybe if he were to pass, I could go with him to ease my sorrow. I could not imagine losing him and I would not know what to do without him. Soon, many more thoughts clashed in my head as I worried about what would happen to the farm, how would my father react. I asked myself questions about why doctors could not have diagnosed it sooner. I hated my grandfather for not telling me. I could not eat or sleep for days.

At the end of the week, on Friday afternoon while my family was packing a second trip to see him, I wept furiously wondering how much worse everything could be. To ease my pain, I created a life size poster. I cut up many of my baby pictures with him and pictures of us throughout the years. I found a special picture with him next to me holding my pencil. I had my parents enlarge the photo and created it as the focal point of my art piece. Because I was a very expressive writer, I decided to dedicate a poem to him. I wrote it in large cursive letters on his poster. I packed it away to bring it with me to the hospital and was again excited to see him.

On Saturday morning when I arrived, my grandmother sat me down and explained over the week, his mental state had deteriorated. He was in and out of radiation therapy which was not successful. He no longer was able to recognize even her and she was worried on how I would react. My eyes started to swell with tears as I realized I missed my chance to say good-bye. I missed the final chance to tell him I loved him and how thankful I was for everything he had done. I have grown up so much as an established young man who excelled in school. Without his motivation, his guidance and inspiration – I would be lost. I had the urge to tear up my poster because it was useless. My grandmother held my arm tightly and explained that although he may not be talking correctly with his disillusioned state with the medication, she would advise me to sit on his side and recite my poem.

I walked into his dark hospital room as the room reeked of a distinctive medical smell. I held his cold hand and told him I was there for him. My grandfather's face was emotionless. Difficultly, as I trembled at each word, I recited my poem as best I could. I could no longer deal with the pain, so I put my poster down and left the room. My family bid their farewells until Sunday night.

My mother, siblings and I drove back to Seattle on Sunday night. I was devastated he no longer remembered who I was or the fact that we could not spend his birthday with him. My father called and said they decided to rush him home to the Moses Lake ranch,

which was almost two hours away from the Wenatchee hospital. As my grandmother, father and auntie rode in the rushing ambulance, they saw an unusual beautiful arch of white butterflies. My father also informed me of the weird visuals my grandfather was uttering about children gathering around him and seeing his mother and siblings who had passed years before. They knew his time was coming. They remember him saying he would like to pass in peace at his home.

Until this day, I believe I still receive messages from my grandfather. At Moses Lake, on every visit, a little white butterfly would follow us grandchildren around. Surprisingly, whenever a celebration occurs within our immediate family, we would see a white butterfly on our Seattle window pane. At times when I am by myself, I suddenly receive a rush of the same hospital odor. He also talks to me in my dreams.

With just two weeks notice, it stuns me every time that I remember how fast and traumatic that moment was in my life. Each year that summer comes by, I dedicate a moment to remember his life and celebrate the memories in the years I was able to share with him. In a way, the sorrow will be never ending, as a void will continue to reside in my heart. Cancer has robbed me of my chance to have my grandfather see me walk down my college graduation aisle, a moment he promised. I dreamed one day to see him waiting at the end of the line for his embrace. I learned that life should never be taken for granted and people you love are not with you forever. Human beings only live once. Within the limited previous time we have, it is essential to let people know how we feel and what difference they have made in our lives. Cancer does not just affect the victim but captures families as its prey as well. Watching my grandfather fight for his life is something I never want my own children to experience. Although he has passed away, his words continue to live on. I know he will forever reside in me and he truly has never left. Until this day, he has continued to help me achieve my dreams and still remains my main inspiration in all that I do.

Coffee, Bedpans, Rehearsals, and you, Daddy

Sydney Kaser

I am ashamed of how I feel and I'm not afraid to admit it. I blush at the thought of what I want. The thought of what I pray to God for every single day. Pray to the God that I don't think exists; but I do it anyway. I won't pretend that I'm OK. I won't tell you I'm fine when I know you know I'm not. I won't smile just to shrug you off. I won't tell you lies just to get you off my back. This is my reality and you're welcome to it. My father has leukemia. Yes. I said it. It doesn't make it any less real or any better. It just is.

It's always something. It won't make me forget the nights I stayed up listening to the vomit hit the bedpan. It won't make me forget the look on my mother's face that day in November when she told me my daddy had cancer. It won't make me forget the stringent smell of antiseptics that seemed to follow my daddy when he hobbled around the nurses' station after his second round of chemo. It won't make me forget the crushing sensation in my chest every time I walk through the doors of the hospital, holding my sister's hand. Just like we used to when we were little. It won't make me forget the smell of acrid coffee that penetrated my clothes every time I left his room in search of crackers and a Diet Coke. It won't make me forget the fight I had backstage with my friend on our last dress rehearsal. The day I lost it. The day I couldn't stop crying for two hours. The day I lost control of my senses and became weak and frail. And I wasn't the one with cancer.

It's really always something, isn't it? I know that I should be strong and supportive of my daddy; should do everything my mommy wants me to do. But sometimes I just want to curl up under a rock and die. Make this all go away. Dear God, make it all go away. Let him die so he won't feel any more pain. Let him die so our lives could start to stabilize again. Stop these constant trips to the Emergency Room in the middle of the night that wake me up when all I want to do is sleep it all away. My father screaming at my mother because he can't open one container or another. Yelling because I did the dishes like he asked but forgot to put away the clean dishes in the dishwasher. Yelling because he can't function like he used to. He is now reminiscent of a small child: unable to do everything for himself. Sometimes he can't make it to the bathroom in time. Then he cries when we try to help. Dear God, please. Make him better or make it all go away. Daily I see my daddy give himself insulin shots. And he is deadly afraid of needles. I see him choke down pills, a dribble of water running down his chin, and then he smiles at me when he can breathe again. I see the bloody protuberances from his eyes glisten in the light of the T.V. that is almost always on now. I look into his eyes and imagine I can see the floaters that are starting to blind him.

It's always something, one thing or another. But, this is my daddy. The daddy that used to drive me to rehearsals for a play or for orchestra. The daddy that I used to have long talks with on the way. The daddy that came to every flute recital or concert, regardless of how inconsequential it was. Now he can't get along very easily, and he can't be around big crowds because he is immune-suppressed. This is the daddy that cried one day when I came up to say hi after school. He said he loved me and he said sorry for all of the things he'd said and done in the last few months. The things that were hurtful, and scary. The things that I just wish would stop happening. I believe him when he says they won't happen again. But I know that I can't really trust him. It will just happen again on another day when he isn't feeling well. Oh well. It's always something with him. Always something new each day. A new bruise, a new cut that opened up on his friable skin. His skin just like aging paper. Maybe it's a new pill. A new pump to attach to his Hickman catheter line. A new infusion mommy needs to give him. It's always something about daddy, about mommy, about my sister, about leukemia. About me.

Growing Up Without a Mom

Dean Kirkpatrick

Every time I am faced with a new dilemma, I grow a significant amount. I have faced many challenges throughout my lifetime. When I was in 7th grade, my best friend Alex moved to Ohio. Sophomore year I was cut from the basketball team, which was the first time since I was 6 years old that I hadn't played organized basketball. Just last month I played the last high school football game I will ever play for the rest of my life. None of these experiences have changed my life as significantly as losing my mother.

It's hard to hear that my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, especially as a 5th grader. At that moment, I did not fully understand cancer. I did not know that it was a disease capable of killing. I underestimated how serious this situation was, and later on learned how dangerous it can get. It was the summer after 7th grade and I was 13 years old. My parents called my sister and me to come down to the living room for a family meeting. I knew what this meeting was going to be about. In the previous weeks, my mom had been having immense difficulty with everyday tasks. She had stopped playing soccer for the first time in her life since she was in elementary school. It became increasingly difficult for her to eat. It seemed like every time she tried to eat, her stomach wouldn't allow it, and she would immediately throw-up. I remember plugging my ears every time this happened because of the pain I felt knowing that her cancer was not getting better. I thought that if I couldn't hear it then I could pretend it wasn't really happening. She had also begun to swell up, and visits to the hospital became frequent, almost routine. My fears became reality; my mom told us that her breast cancer had moved to her liver and that this was going to be the last summer of her life. She didn't believe that she would even make it to our vacation, which was scheduled in two weeks, mid-July. This was the first event that changed who I am. I became optimistic. I believed in my mom and I wasn't willing to let her give up. I told her that I knew she would make it to the vacation, I was 100% positive. I truly believe that telling my mom this was the reason that she did make it to the vacation. It seemed like it gave her confidence, because someone else believed in her. She wasn't staying alive for her own sake, she was selfless: she did it for my family and me.

My mom lived for another month, passing away on August 23rd, 2002. Although I only lived a short 13 years with such a wonderful person, I learned everlasting lessons. The first thing I learned was how to take care of myself. This was a mandatory change I had to make because my dad was at work almost the whole day and my sister was a senior in high school on her own schedule. Within the first few months of my newly changed life, I had to learn how to cook, clean and grocery shop for myself.

More important than learning to live on my own, my mom taught me timeless lessons I will never forget. She taught me to never hold in or bottle up my emotions, for that will only hurt me more. She also taught me to value life and what you have. You don't realize what you have until you've lost it. I wish I had understood that before I lost my mom. I feel like I took her for granted sometimes. Now I realize what other things I

have and I value these with the utmost regard. First and foremost, my family and friends have priority over everything else. True success isn't a measurement of material objects, but that of internal happiness. In my case, my friends and family are the source of the happiness.

I've Seen It All, So Back Up!!

Angelica McRae a.k.a. Haley

This is the journey that I went through at the age of twelve. It lasted for a good four to five years. Over the course of three and a half months my body started to break down on me. I was weak; I couldn't do anything I felt that my social life was over.

January 16th, 2003:

I came home one day from school and my body was sore; my arms, legs, back, and neck. My whole body ached. I went to sleep and woke up crying.

I asked my sister to lay down with me around 9:10 pm but she didn't. She went to her room and left me there to fall asleep by myself. I woke up at 12:15 am crying my eyes out. I couldn't move, my leg was shaking and I had a sharp pain all throughout my body. I picked up enough strength to get up and crawled downstairs. I got downstairs and found mom in the bathroom. I went in and sat on the toilet seat to tell her what was wrong with me. She went into the living room and told my uncle to start the car. This would be the beginning of my journey.

January 17th 2003:

2:08 am

I was at Virginia Mason hospital with IVs all in my arm waiting for the doctor to come back. About a half an hour later they took blood test and that's when everything went down hill. As I waited my uncle and I were talking and he was telling me that I was faking and that I had to go to school in the morning.

The doctor came in the room asking me if I knew where my mother was and I told him no, so he left the room to go and look for her. When my mom came back in the room she was crying. I asked her what was wrong but she wouldn't tell me. My step-dad came in the room and I asked him what was wrong with my mom, but he wouldn't tell me. I was asking and asking but nobody told me anything, and I wanted to know. Finally my mom told me that the doctors thought I had sickocell. I didn't know what it was so I really didn't pay any attention to it. (Not a smart move)

The doctors at my hospital really didn't know what to do so they sent me to Redmond's Group Health Hospital. We didn't leave until 4:00am in the morning. While I slept the doctors did all kinds of tests on me. When I woke up there was a lot of people surrounding me, they tried to talk to me but I didn't want to hear anything unless my mom was around. When my mom finally walked through the door and came to my bed, the doctor told her that I had leukemia. My mom broke in tears. I asked the doctor what it was and if I was going to die. He told me that leukemia was a cancer that flows through the blood and he didn't know where it came from. By the look on the doctor's face you could tell he was shocked when I asked him if I was going to die. He told me that if I would've waited another three to four days that I would've died. When my mom heard that she broke down again. She felt that death was under my nose and nobody knew it.

She was scared that she was going to lose her youngest daughter. At the hospital, the doctors went straight to work setting up my chemo dates and my surgery dates.

January 20th 2003:

I couldn't eat for 24 hours; I had to get ready for my surgery. I was getting a tube placed in my chest so that I could receive my chemo. My sister was there, my grandmother, and my mom. Everybody was sad and crying but I had to keep my spirits high to let them know I was fine (for the time being). But once I saw that my time was up, I cried like a baby getting ready to go under the needle. It was my time at 7:18 pm. I was scared. When I woke up at 9:24 pm I was happy that I made it out alive; all I wanted to see was my mommy.

January 21st 2003:

My first shower in five days, the water hurt my body but I went through it. An hour later I would have my spinal tap and bone marrow, my second time under the needle. As the days went by things were on a time schedule a routine.

Wake up

Check up

Eat

Chemo

Eat

Sleep

Wake Up

Watch TV

Dinner

More TV

Then back to sleep.

Once I woke up it was time to do everything all over again. On a surgery day I'd eat, then my surgery then everything else.

February 12th 2003

The day I was released from the hospital. I was so happy, it was the first time I saw my house in weeks. I had a welcome home dinner and it was nice, but I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that just because I got to go back home, that didn't mean I wasn't going to see that hospital any more. I was going back every week.

April 14th 2003

April 14th 2003 was one of the happiest days of my life. I got to go on a shopping spree with two thousand dollars. April 14th is also my mom's birthday, and nobody gave her a better present than me. I was back home to stay.

My hair has always been long as a young child and all my hair fell out I was bald. As a young girl I loved to do my hair, I've always taken care of my hair and for it to fall out when it just started to grow was very sad. Also on top of that I had to take all kinds of pills, nothing nice.

Even though I was home sometimes it felt like the hospital, it wasn't too bad because I was in my house. One thing that I really noticed after going through everything is that you will figure out who will be there for you, and you will really see your loved ones true colors. For an example my family members that I truly thought were going to be there for me weren't. Believe it or not they said Haley's on her deathbed I'm cool.

February 2004

I went back to the Group Health Hospital and they transferred to me Children's Hospital. I was getting all kinds of blood transfusions because I wasn't doing so well. Things went from bad to worse when I was getting a blood transfusion and I ended up getting bad blood so I had to be admitted to the I.C.U.

March 2004

I was in the I.C.U. for a good two weeks. I went through my surgery because of the bad blood. I had to get my tube taken out of my chest and to this day I still have the scar. For the next year or so I pretty much went through the same things over and over again, back and forth to the hospital. It's something that you have to get used to, a new life. You will do what you have to do to stay alive. Wake up at four in the morning if that's what it takes. Life is a very precious thing, never take it for granted. You never know what will happen next. Your life could be taken from you. Like mine almost was in damn near a blink of an eye.

April 10th 2004

I promise you this is the happiest day of my life. It's like there is no higher joy than this day, none at all. My doctor called my family down to the back room and he looked me dead in my eye and said "You are CANCER FREE." There's nothing I could do but smile to myself and say "Girl, we made it."

Looking back on all the things I have been through I am happy that I can. Instead of my family having a big cloud of sorrow on a day where I had passed away and I am happy that they don't have to go through that pain. Going through all of this I can say that I have matured a lot; I have learned tons of things in a short period of time and at a young age.

I had learned to stay strong for my family. I felt that I had to be the rock in my family even though I was the one going through chemo. I felt that I had to keep them strong by keeping my spirits high and showing them that I am still me, so they wouldn't be in a hospital bed laid up next to me over a breakdown.

I look at life so differently now than I used to. I've seen death too many times to be afraid to die, but I treasure my life. It's amazing to me on how I went from a dark morning in a hospital, to now going to school looking back on the bad and forward to my future. I see it as nobody can hold me back from me doing what I go to do. I've seen it all, so BACK UP!

5 YEARS TO LIFE.

ANGELICA MARIA MENDEZ MCRAE AKA: HALEY!!!!

My Brother Michael

Jonathan Linders

The immense coughing continued to resonate through the night, disturbing those who were listening. Blood began to seep out of the sick boy's mouth, mixed with undigested food and mucus. There I was sitting on a rickety, old chair, rocking back and forth, and pondering what was to come. A doctor finally walked in, wearing a white coat with his neatly stacked reports, and the look on his face revealed everything. "Cancer?... What did this sweet boy do to deserve such a life threatening disease?" I asked myself. However, an answer never came.

Michael was the happiest boy ever who played cheerfully every day, whether it was hanging out with the family, playing video games, or imagining explosive battle scenes in the bathroom. Whatever he did, joy emanated from his heart. He had a sense of enjoying life fully, and accepting nothing less. Even in the hospital as cancer crept upon his life, he maintained a warm attitude that was always pleasant to be around. The atmosphere would change completely when he entered a room, changing from dullness to full of humor and absolute fun. This boy Michael truly amazed everyone.

I was about four years old when the doctor diagnosed my younger brother with leukemia. This fatal type of cancer slowly weakened his immune system, which would gradually destroy his whole body in a matter of years. However, several kinds of treatments were used such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy to prevent the distressing results, giving Michael about a seventy percent chance of survival. Our family could only hope and pray that these remedies would cure our beloved Michael at the young age of two.

Many long months of fighting the cancer dragged on and the doctor finally announced a clean bill of health, releasing Michael to go home. During his remission, he started going back to school and enjoyed everyday life again, as everything soon went back to where it used to be.

Just three years passed and the cancer unexpectedly relapsed. His chances dwindled down to fifty percent, shocking my family and other close friends. At this point, the doctor recommended a bone marrow transplant, which was an operation of intensive surgery for the donor.

Thorough the blood tests were taken throughout my family to test blood type compatibility. My parents went first, my older brother next, and then me. My turn finally came and the doctor called me up, positioning the chair for me to sit in. I glanced at the long needle as if it was going to stab into my heart. Knots started developing in my stomach and I felt like fainting. My feet felt as cold as ice and pressure compressed up in my face. The doctor strapped my right arm down and I felt ready for the worst. At once, the needle drove into my pasty white arm, sucking blood out like a mosquito. The time

seemed to have paused. The minute felt like eternity, but I made it through. The doctor gently slid the needle out and I was finished.

Fear built up in me as the doctors compared my blood type to Michael's. Surgery always frightened me and the hospital scene constantly gave me uneasy feelings. Every night in bed, I would ask God to take this burden off me and let someone else in my family have the matching blood type. However, it was just my luck that the blood tests showed my blood matched perfectly with Michael's. My mother said, "Do it for your brother," and those words stuck out to me like black against white. After thinking about it, I firmly decided to go in as the donor, and donate my life-giving bone marrow, hoping to build back his immune system from ruin. I didn't want my brother to die because I loved him so much. So I was willing to give a couple pints of bone marrow and begin with the operation.

The transplant succeeded, adding two more years onto Michael's life and he came into remission for a second time. Yet he relapsed once more, and for the final time. His chance of survival became very minimal and despair struck us deep in our hurting hearts. My family and I knew it was the end for Michael and it was time to let go. There was no other suitable treatment to cure this resilient cancer now. I looked into Michael's eyes and told him, "Thanks for being the greatest brother and being that humble friend of mine." Then momentarily after, his last breaths were taken.

On September 5, 1999, Michael passed away. It was hard for me to realize how a cancer such as leukemia could take away life in years. I ponder, the greatest thing that I recollect from Michael's life is that he had joy throughout it all, in spite of the pain and suffering. He was constantly in and out of the hospital and complaining was never apparent in his life, even though none of us would have blamed him.

Looking back, I see this emotional incident more as a positive hardship than a negative one. The grief will trouble me for the rest of my life, but I have grown in so many different ways because of it. I believe I've grown much closer to my family. Together we reminisce about the past events that we enjoyed with our dear Michael, accepting the fact that he is gone physically, but never apart from our love. In addition, I can reach out to other people who are suffering from a similar situation and offer a comforting shoulder to those hurting, now that I have gone through something equally traumatic. Furthermore, I've learned to remain joyful, whatever the circumstances may be and that a positive attitude is the key to making life enjoyable for yourself and to everyone else around you. Michael taught me that poignant example and it reflected off other people around him as well. Forever I will miss Michael, and forever I will love him for his tender loving spirit.