

2009 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

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Everything Happens for a Reason

Kevin Lindahl

At the tender age of eleven, my life as I had known it was forever changed. At the precipice moving into a new home in a new city and starting at a new school I started having throbbing headaches almost everyday; each day getting worse and worse. Acknowledging this as an increasingly serious problem, my mother scheduled a doctor's appointment. Once there, the doctors scheduled me for an MRI, where they discovered my brain tumor. The tumor was located on my brain stem and was blocking the cerebral fluid from draining down my spine which ultimately caused those pressure headaches and forced my eyes to shake.

The very next day we were up at the Children's Hospital in Seattle at an appointment with the neural surgeons. They determined that I would have to undergo immediate surgery. A week later they brought me back to the Children's Hospital where I would be staying for the next eight days and undergoing three different brain surgeries. One surgery was to relieve the pressure; which unfortunately they could not. The second surgery was to insert a shunt (a tube implanted in my brain) that would relieve the blocked fluid so it could drain correctly down my spine. The last and final surgery of that week was a biopsy of the tumor where they would test it to indicate what it was exactly so that they could determine how to get rid of it.

As if hearing your child has a brain tumor is not bad enough, the situation worsened when we got the results from the biopsy. It was now official, I, Kevin Lindahl, at the innocent age of eleven years old, had cancer. Luckily, the type of cancer I had, Germinoma was very rare yet very treatable; and thankfully we caught the signs early enough that the tumor was still fairly small. This greatly increased my odds of beating the disease. With the help of the Children's Hospital neural surgeons and my oncologist, Dr. Halahan, they came up with a plan to shrink and eventually attempt to eliminate my cancer completely.

On July 1st of 2002, I started the first of my three chemotherapy treatments planned by Dr. Halahan. About a week prior to this first treatment I had another surgery to put in my port (catheter) which they used to inject the chemotherapy directly into my heart. This was also used to give me blood transfusions when my counts were low, such as platelets or white blood cells. The months that I underwent chemotherapy were incredibly traumatic, due to all of the countless blood draws, transfusions, treatments, and numerous other needle pokes I was forced to endure. In the beginning, I still had a slight fear of needles, but with this experience and all of the exposure to the "pointy demons" this slight fear developed into a true phobia of needles, that continues to this day.

After months of painful and relentless treatment, it was almost complete. Now that the chemotherapy had shrunk the size of the tumor the only thing left to do was remove the remaining cancer cells that were lingering in my brain. It was at that time when we moved my treatment to the University of Washington Hospital, where I would finish up my cancer treatments with radiation. The physical impact of radiation was mediocre compared to the trauma

of chemotherapy. All I had to do was lay still on a table with my face restrained under a mask as they beamed radiation to precise points in my brain to destroy the remaining cancer cells. Radiation treatment only took three weeks, but was a daily occurrence.

Five years after the last day of my treatment on October 29, 2007, I could finally be considered a survivor. However, the trauma and uncertainty that resulted from those few months of treatment will be with me always. I never would have been able to get through this without the loving support of a great family and the trust in a highly skilled team of experts. I am proud to say that on November 19, 2008 I had another MRI, over six years after the end of my treatments, I am cancer-free! And to make this day even better my doctor informed us that I don't even need to come back for another routine MRI, I am completely done with cancer! The chance of it returning is so slim that they don't even worry about it anymore.

Now that the horror of cancer and it's treatments are done with and I have time to look back on the past seven years, I realize that it wasn't all as bad as it may sound. I developed a new outlook on life and in a way, grew up faster by learning to take on responsibilities. Having a tragedy like this happening actually brought my family closer, which helped me overcome. There were even a few times during my treatment where I was able to take a break from the bad sides and have a little fun; like when I got to throw out a first pitch at a Mariners game after a rough day in the hospital, because the nurses knew the Mariners were my favorite team and felt bad seeing me in so much pain. Or my Make-A-Wish, which was a Disney Cruise in Florida for a week!

Another part of this story that I am thankful for is the incredible staff and doctors at Children's and everywhere else cancer or sick kids are involved. I grew so close to my doctors and nurses that they felt like a second family.

Some of the doctors and nurses even participated at Camp Goodtimes (a camp put on by the American Cancer Society for cancer patients and survivors) where I was a Leader In Training for two years and hope to come back as staff. While there I found that I loved helping younger children that are going through the same things I went through. With this experience, I am now looking at going into child psychology when I get into college.

I believe that most things in life happen for a reason. I'm not saying that every time you stub your toe is for a reason, but major things that go on during one's life, such as having cancer or going through another life changing experience. I strongly believe that I was diagnosed with cancer and was able to overcome this deadly disease for a reason, maybe to help others who might go through the same challenge, whatever the reason is, I know that after everything I've been through that I am completely ready to move on with my life and face what's ahead.

For You, Daddy

Caroline Min

Cancer. The one word that causes everyone to shudder. I never thought I would see anyone deal with such a horrifying disease, let alone anyone from my family. Cancer was supposed to be an illness that was only shown on television or read about in books: not something that would affect me personally. But I know I'm not alone. Millions of people have had to suffer the same pain I have, and I wish to support all those who are currently undergoing the dreadful tribulations of this atrocious disease.

As for now, I am forced to face reality myself. Only 53 days until a year has passed. Only 53 days until I will have to overcome my fear of being in total remembrance of the day my life was completely altered. Only 53 days. It truly is amazing how fast time flies.

That fateful day, I remember it vividly. I doubt that the image will ever vanish from my thoughts. The day my world came crashing down on me. March 25th, 2008. I came home to my crying mother who was accompanied by a hospice worker. Although this was uncommon, I did not stop to think of what was occurring; instead, I as a naive and foolish child went upstairs to go about my daily tasks. After a while, I came down as my mother called me; unaware of the significance of the words I was about to hear, I simply stared as I watched my mom break down. What I heard next created an indescribable feeling deep within me, the words no one wants to hear. Essentially, it all came down to this: "It seems as if your dad only has a week or so left to live..." Although this may seem implausible, these words hit me hard for one reason: for the past two years, I had never thought that I would ever lose my dad. My faith in God surpassed all the doubts that had ever even thought to cross my mind. Despite my mother's cautions to "be prepared" incase it did happen, I never stopped to think of the reality of the situation. My dad, the man who seemed to have no fears or weaknesses. My dad, the man who always made all those around him laugh. My dad, the man who constantly teased me with a smile on his face. My dad, the man who no one seemed to be able to dislike. My dad, my dad, my dad... it simply did not click. Until this moment. I hate crying in front of my mom, let alone a complete stranger, so I left to talk to my dad himself. When I came to him, I realized then how true the actuality of the circumstances was. Tears rolling down my face, I stared at my one and only daddy. He was now in a completely different state from what he had used to be. The once lively and active man I knew was now confined to a bed, unable to do anything alone. He had become another child, a child who could not walk, a child with a diaper because he could not go to the bathroom, a child who rarely talked, a child who must be fed and cleaned by another person. Although it may seem childish, for some reason, I rarely say the words "I love you." However, for the first time in a long time, I stared at my dad with tears streaming down my cheek, and I said the three most powerful words known to humans, "Daddy, I love you..."

Even though my dad never responded to me, I knew in my heart he meant the same. I could

tell from the way he looked at me when I said those three words, the words I hardly ever uttered. Still, I couldn't stand it. I had to leave. I had to get out of the house. I ran out the door into the car and sped off. Away from reality. Away from all the stress. Away from my problems. Away, I had to get away. I now realize how childlike my behavior had been, for I did not realize how precious time was.

After an hour of being alone, I received a phone call from my brother. I picked up obliviously. And then I heard them. The words I had never thought I would hear. "The ambulance is here. They say he has one hour..." After I heard those words, I screamed. I yelled. How could this be? One week changed to one hour? I started to shout at my brother, "You liar! Don't lie to me! Don't lie to me..." And then I started bawling. My dad, my one and only daddy, was about to die. He was about to be taken from me for the rest of my life.

I, normally a careful driver, sped over 20 miles above the speed limit to get home. At that point, I didn't care. I didn't care about anything but him. I needed to get home; I needed to see my daddy. I came home at the sight of an ambulance and fire truck in front of my house and started to howl even more wildly. I ran inside and saw my dad with tubes all around him and with the comforts of my mother, younger brother, and best friend, there was nothing to do but watch and cry. I watched as I saw the one man I truly loved struggle between the doors of life and death. And then he was gone. Forever.

Although I try to have an optimistic outlook in all circumstances and believe that everything happens for a reason, I can't help but say it actually is extremely difficult. For two years, my family and I had struggled to fight the fight of cancer, and all our efforts had failed. During those times of hardship, my dad had to endure crucial pain that I had never imagined anyone to have to bear. The last six months were the hardest, for both him and the members of my family. The physical pain he went through, the pain that caused him to shriek as he depicted a vivid image of ten knives stabbing him in his leg. The sleepless nights that my mom had to go through as she took care of my dad. Agony. Our hearts were filled with agony.

At times, I wished I could switch places with him. I didn't want to see my daddy go through such hurting any longer, but I didn't want him to leave me either. Maybe by trying to keep him alive with me, I was being selfish. But I couldn't help it. My selfish desires surpassed my rational thoughts; I just didn't want to let him go. Despite his broken promises: that he would watch me as I grew up, that he would walk me down the aisle and give me away to my future husband, that he would see what college I ended up going to. In spite of it all, I would still give up anything and everything to have saved my daddy, or at least help him to find his diagnosis earlier. Then he wouldn't have had to endure such pain or leave life on earth so pitifully, and my family wouldn't have to undergo such anguishing grief. Then he'd be with me here today, and I wouldn't be writing this...

I can't lie and say that this experience has only created a different perspective of life for me. I can't lie and say I've merely come out a stronger person. I can't lie and say I will simply live each day as if it's my last. I can't do it. Yes, these things may be true, but it's not the end of it.

Yes, this experience has taught me not to take anyone or anything for granted. Yes, I've learned the significance of family. Yes, my family had become much closer throughout the two years of trial.

But by merely stating the positives of this whole experience, I feel that I am not giving my daddy enough credit. He meant the world to me. He still does. His death cannot purely be a beneficial incident to me. It hurts. Reminiscing, that is. Even writing this essay makes me cringe. The thought of that day. That horrendous day that has turned my life around. The days that I've had to go through without him. And it's all because of cancer. It's always something, isn't it?

My Mom

Macon Abernathy

“Guys, come in here! Your mom and I need to share something with you.” That cry of my Dad is now just a faint whisper of my memory. It had been nearly seven years since my Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. So many highs and lows happened over those seven years; I can’t express in words the joy and overwhelming feeling of thanks to God that the news of a tumor eradication can bring. Nor can I speak of the sinking sorrow that follows the discovery that the cancer has spread. Just as hard to describe is the experience of seeing God’s delivering hand through all of my Mom’s trials. All of the chemotherapy and radiation treatments I went to with her; all of the walks we went on as part of her training for the Avon 3-Day; all of these memories, and many more I now cherish as my tie to my Mom’s amazing life, love and strength.

But these memories are far from me as I sit in a chair in Northwest Hospital, heart bleeding as my Dad explains to my brothers and I that she may not make it through the night. I’m collapsing in on myself. “NO! This can’t be happening! This can’t be happening!” The thoughts cascade through my head as tears roll down my cheeks. I look over at my brother Tanner, then eight. He’s crying too.

That night is one of the heaviest in my mind, but it’s also one of happiest, because that night God preformed a miracle. My brothers and I had left our Mom that night with nothing more than the promise for a bleak tomorrow and the mental picture of our Mom lying unconscious on a hospital bed with tubes coming out of her arm and chest. We returned that next day to find that not only had our Mom survived the night, but to the Doctors’ amazement she was awake and laughing. That morning turned into a celebration as family and friends stopped by to visit with her and us. That morning was truly one of the most joyous in my life.

She was slated for brain surgery that same day. The Doctors said that they would have to place her under the knife to remove several of the largest tumors. She had already had three Gamma Knife surgeries in attempts to eradicate the cancer, but as successful as they were none had been able to completely destroy all of it. But God was still watching out for us. The surgeon who was to perform the procedure was possibly the best doctor qualified to do it.

The following days brought much relief and joy as our Mom recovered and healed from her surgery. The doctors had been able to remove several tumors, the largest the size of a golf ball. Unfortunately, the surgeons had not been able to extract all of the tumors, but that mattered little as we walked down the ward of the intensive care unit to see that our Mom was okay.

A few days later, I remember I came home from school and Mom was there. I was so excited! It seemed like joy had returned to our home. I was especially excited because my thirteenth birthday was a week away and I had been afraid I might not get the chance to share it with her. But she was there! And her presence made that birthday one of my most treasured. She

even went to Dairy Queen with my friends and I, despite the weakness she carried. That was one of the best gifts I've ever received.

Several days after she came home she went back to the hospital to get a CAT and MRI scan done to check the effectiveness of the surgery. None of us were worried, but life can be cruel. When the results came back we found out that many of the remaining tumors continued to grow. I was scared. Despite this bad news, we all continued to hope and trust that God would heal her and see all of us through that dark time.

Weeks went by, and to my family and I's sadness she got weaker and weaker until she became bedridden. Three things from this time I can remember well. The first was when my Dad and Mom called the three of us together and told us that at the rate her tumors were growing, she wouldn't live to see a new week. The second is how fast her health deteriorated. One day, she was taking Tylenol to help with the headaches, a few days later, no amount of morphine would do any good. The third was the last time she climbed up the stairs from our basement to her bedroom, she was so feeble, my grandpa had to help her or else she wouldn't have made it. That was the last time she left the upstairs.

We constantly had people in our house the next few days. Our Mom always had company. Family was over every day (at this point friends became family), which I really enjoyed because we didn't get to see them too often. Our Dad hired a hospice nurse to help take care of Mom once she couldn't leave the bed at all. This was especially hard for my brothers and I, because after she became completely bedridden we weren't allowed to see her very often. Our church gave us so much support during this time and friends brought over dinner every night.

Several days passed, Mom got worse. One night, our Aunt Amy, Grandma, Grandpa and our pastor, Daniel and his wife Anita came over and met with our Dad by our Mom's bed. They were up there for hours and wouldn't let Talon, Tanner or I in. They left around eight O'clock.

At 10:30, Dad came down and told us that if we wanted to say our last words of love to Mom, this was the time to do it; she probably wouldn't survive the night. He warned us that her skin was kind of grey and her breathing was ragged. Talon and I got up there and as we stood by her bedside told her that we loved her and said good-bye. It was scary to listen to her breathe; she was fighting for every breath. We knew this was the end; the seven year war cancer had waged on her now-ravaged body ended tonight. Her skin grew paler and her breaths became fewer and farther between. Anything that was holding my Dad together before came undone at that moment. He started crying and hugging her, I saw but could not grasp what was happening. And then, at 10:47PM on May 24th, 2005 Kerry Sue Abernathy was taken Home.

Somewhere in the Bible it talks about being healed, rescued and victorious after seven years. God did all of these with my Mom that night, maybe not in the way we wanted, but that's okay. She was finally victorious and cancer free after seven long years of war.

My Other Brother

Lindsay Hanson

Dear Christopher,

I know you will never be able to hold this in your hands and read it. I know you will never have the chance to tell me what you think about the things I'm about to say. One thing I do know is that you are forever with me and through your presence you have taught me so many things I would have never known and you have helped me become who I am. I know that I can not make a wish and have you back, I know all the prayers in the world will not return you home, but I hope you're looking down on me and can see all that you have done for me.

Since I was three years old you had called me your little sister. Growing up with you I had never once thought this would ever happen. You were always the athletic one, you were an honors student and you excelled in every thing you did. When I had heard you had been diagnosed with cancer I didn't know what to think. Was it something you would be able to recover from or was this going to be a never ending battle? Sadly, after the two year battle, at the age of 21, the cancer had taken you away from me.

Saturday October 10th 2008 was the day that God decided he needed you. I just don't think he realizes how much we need you down here. I wish I could erase that day from my memory, but unfortunately it's stuck with me. You were the first person that I loved that I have lost. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I saw my brother come into my room with tears in his eyes. Right away I knew what he was about to say. Those two words instantly broke my heart. Never have I ever felt such an indescribable pain. To think that the world had just lost an extraordinary person crushed me.

The day before your funeral your family held a viewing. I was so afraid that if I went to see you then it would be the only way I would remember you. I sat in the pew for at least an hour or two before I finally convinced myself that I needed to see you one last time. You finally looked at peace. You had your x-box controller in one hand, your rosary beads in the other and your Nintendo DS at your side. That's the Chris I remember. The one who would play video games till the sun came up, the one who watched ESPN like it was a religion, and the one who no matter what happened, had a smile on his face. You were always a big brother to me. You always looked out for me. I remember when we were young and all the neighbor kids would get together and play capture the flag. I was the so called "runt" of the group and no one wanted me on their team. No matter what, you made sure that I was on your team. I know it might seem silly, but you helped whether you knew it or not; I thank you so much for that.

After you passed I had a more difficult time then I ever thought I would. Every time I

laughed, smiled or had a good time I felt guilty. It seemed like it wasn't fair that I was laughing and having a good time and you had just lost your life. Slowly but surely I came to realize that from this tough situation I could learn a great lesson. I soon learned to never take anything in life for granted. I now enjoy the time I spend with the ones I love. I saw what was truly important in life, and I

have you to thank for showing me this.

I remember the day after you passed away I had a soccer game. I begged my parents to not make me go because I didn't have the energy, but they insisted and told me to get out there and play for you. As I was getting ready for my game, I slipped a picture of the two of us inside my sock. I was determined to play this game for you, and only you. I'll admit, I broke down at random times during the game because you were all I could think about, but I knew that you were looking down upon me giving me the strength to get out there and give it my all.

All the tears I have shed as I wrote this will never compare to the laughs and memories you have given me over the past 14 years. Everyday I miss you more and more. I have never felt so lucky to have known someone so significant. I'm thankful for being blessed with your smile and grace. Thank you for teaching me what life is all about; holding on when you think you've had enough and holding your head high when you feel like giving up. Thank you for being my other brother. I'll see you soon
Christopher.

Love, Lindsay.

November 7, 2000

Ilse Montes De Oca

“No, I don’t want to die!” I yelled as I jumped off the hospital bed. I vividly remember that moment on November 7, 2000 that shook my entire life, leaving behind shattered pieces filled with sadness, pain, frustration, confusion, fear, and cancer. Questioning with tears in my eyes, “Why me?” “Am I a bad person?” “Am I going to die?”

It all began with an abdominal pain that wouldn’t heal for over four months, resulting in weight loss and decrease in appetite. Thus, my concerned mother took me to the Yakima Pediatrics Clinic where Dr. Harthcock ordered x-rays to be done on my chest and lungs. At first, he pointed out that it was most likely a pulmonary infection or pneumonia. However, just to be certain, I was going to be hospitalized, begin receiving antibiotics, and go through a series of tests.

Upon arriving at the in-patient room late in the afternoon, I noticed that there were no doctors in sight; rather, there were only nurses who came in to change the antibiotics. At the young age of nine, I was certainly not accustomed to the idea of intravenous therapy and having a hypodermic needle inserted in my veins as it is connected to a syringe filled with antibiotics. Unknowingly, this was merely the beginning of many more hospitalizations to come.

Finally, after long hours of waiting, I was anxious to find out when I would be able to go home. Quietly and with very little facial expressions, Dr. Simms entered the room, followed by a translator. With my mother on my left side and my father to my right, I sat waiting during one of the most silent moments of my life. Then, Dr. Simms took a seat directly in front of me and said, “I’ve seen the x-rays and have come to a diagnosis. What Ilse has is not pneumonia, but a tumor with cancer. The tumor is on the left side of her neck and liquid from the tumor has spread out, down her chest and reached her lower abdomen, involving her left pleural cavity and reaching her upper left side kidney, as easily seen in the x-rays.”

Engulfed with fear, I jumped off the bed and yelled, “No, I don’t want to die!” Subsequently, my mother embraced me so tightly and said, “No mija todo va estar bien! No te va a pasar nada!” (No, darling everything is going to be fine. Nothing is going to happen to you!) On the other hand, my father, who was in shock, didn’t move or say anything. At that time, my brother was only four and was innocently unaware of what was happening. Similarly, my parents and I knew little about cancer, but surely we were aware of its danger and how it could even result in death.

That same night my mom and dad were overwhelmed with desperation as they watched me suffer from the pain, vomiting, and high fever. They were willing to do anything to cure me. They began packing and called a priest to come pray for me at Memorial Hospital before my departure to Children’s Hospital & Medical Center (CHMC). While the priest and my family gathered around me to pray, all I felt were pain, nausea, and fear, while at the same time I felt a

cool rush sweep through my body. I can almost guarantee that it was God touching my soul and fighting the illness. Miraculously, after the priest left, my symptoms disappeared.

After bidding everyone farewell, I departed to CHMC at five in the morning on November 8, 2000. Traveling, I could feel that my family was frightened but we had a renewed sense of hope that everything would be just fine. Without delay after arriving, I was hospitalized in the oncology 3rd floor inpatient care unit. This was the day when I met Dr. Park and Dr. Siegel who were in charge of finding a treatment for my illness. They scheduled for a biopsy and for the placement of a hickman line

which is placed under the skin to the jugular vein and chest wall for the administration of chemotherapy and the withdrawal of blood. It had to be cleaned with heparin every three days to prevent infection and blood clots and had to be covered with plastic and tape whenever I took a shower to prevent it from getting wet.

It was November 9, 2000 and I pondered while lying down on a surgical bed. Anesthetics flowed through my veins as I slowly began falling into a deep sleep, frightened that I might not wake up. The last things I remember were the worried faces of my parents. Throughout the operation, time flew quickly for me, but for my parents it was like standing in the middle of a desert for days without water. Inevitably, it would all be over. Afterwards, although I was in so much pain, all I could think of was how fortunate I was to wake up with my family by my side.

The day after my biopsy, Dr. Park and Dr. Siegel confirmed my diagnosis of Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma and informed us that I would be going through treatment which included chemotherapy. They described the side effects like hair loss, vomiting, pain, nausea, depression of the immune system, weight loss or gain, and infections. The treatment was so intense that it would be necessary for me to come live in Seattle at the Ronald McDonald House. My doctors predicted that my stay would be for over six months and with a 60% chance of survival.

I began my first dosage of chemotherapy on November 11, 2000. At first, it seemed as though the chemotherapy wasn't doing much, but my evaluation exams on December 18, 2000 showed improvement, with the tumor being barely visible. Soon, however, the side effects of the chemotherapy became evident, and hair was everywhere. They were in my clothes and pillow and hair balls formed in the washer and dryer. Whenever, I stroked my hair with my hands, hair would simply fall off, leading to bald spots in my head, so my mom decided to shave the remaining off. Furthermore, I was nauseated, constipated, weak, and vomited constantly. There were times when I was too weak that I had to use a wheelchair, my dad would have to carry me to places, and my mom had to help me take a shower. At first I would get frustrated with my situation, the fact that I could not participate in normal activities who children my age took part in, and the personal need to wear wigs, hats, and bandanas to hide my baldness. Nevertheless, I learned to cope with my disabilities and I learned to ignore those who

stared at me. Later on, I enjoyed not having to do my hair and showing off my bald shiny scalp.

The days when I felt healthy were rare. I was constantly hospitalized because my blood counts were low. I fainted several times and it became essential for me to receive blood transfusions frequently due to the contractions of viruses and low blood counts. Whenever I had visitors in my room, they would have to wear gowns, masks, and gloves to protect me from viruses. I couldn't eat ground grown foods, meat had to be thoroughly cooked, and I was required to wear a mask. Being attached to machines and feeling the chemotherapy and blood running through my hickman line merely became routine for me.

During the first phase of my chemotherapy, my dad could only join us twice a month since he had to work in Yakima. Once, as he was driving on the Snoqualmie pass from Seattle to Yakima, he got into a car accident wherein his car slid and turned several times. It was a true miracle that he had survived and sadly, I was unable to comfort him. After this accident, my mom and I begged him to come live with us. We didn't want to risk his life and my brother's again. He finally moved in with us, and found a job in Seattle. Afterwards in 2001, I experienced an earthquake in Seattle. All these events, including my cancer diagnosis, resulted in anxiety and depression. I was constantly frightened, unable to sleep or be alone as my mind continuously thought of malignant spirits appearing and harming me. Consequently, I had to get assistance from a psychologist. There was a point when I even had to take medication for my anxiety. Even so, throughout every moment of my life, I am thankful that my family has been inseparable.

As months passed, I continued treatment and my daily schedule included taking up to twenty pills per day and spending long ill nights in the hospital. On the bright side, I began enjoying Seattle and meeting people, specially those who were also fighting for their lives. Some of whom returned, winning the battle while others struggled, losing the fight. I had the opportunity to meet people of different cultures from all over the world, each with a different story to tell. The people we were living with and those at CHMC were extremely supportive. Those who were not cancer patients were always trying to make our stay joyful. One Christmas, they took us on a cruise, planned family activities, and provided food. Volunteers spent time with the patients, entertaining us so we could forget about our illness. The hospital even offered a tutor so I wouldn't get behind in school work. Therefore, after returning home, I was fortunately able to continue with my education.

Finally, after almost a year of treatment, I would be returning home. Re-imaging and evaluation took place to assure that my condition was stable, and my hickman line was then removed. Surprisingly, mixed feelings of dread and happiness swept through me. Mainly because I was going to miss Seattle, the hospital, my friends, and fearful that it would be my last time seeing them. At the same time, I was thrilled to know that my complete remission was nearing even though I still had to continue my

oral medications and chemotherapy in Yakima with Dr. Simms.

Even at the comfort of my own home, I was still forced to face many challenges, especially when I returned to school. Because my hair had not grown back, I had to wear hats and bandanas at school. I struggled, finding it difficult to constantly explain my situation; why I was bald, swollen from the chemotherapy, and why I had to wear face masks. I felt as if everyone stared at me, curious about my physical appearance. Fortunately, I was able to overcome my fears and learned to share my story with others, all of whom listened kind-heartedly.

Although I was still often sick from the chemotherapy, hospitalized from contracted viruses, and absent from school, I was able to finish elementary school and began middle school where I became involved in sports and school activities. The only difficulties were the long term side effects of the chemotherapy, including weakness in my body and having to receive physical therapy and assistance from a nutritionist.

I have been in remission and currently have yearly check-ups. Reminiscing, I realize that cancer has been both a challenge and a blessing. Even though one has to overcome the hardships in life, one has to have faith that things happen for the best. It is through my suffering that I learned the power of my family's love and how no one should feel superior or inferior, for everyone is brought into this world with a unique purpose. It is my goal in life to become a pediatric oncologist and with a compassionate heart, be able to one day walk down the halls of a Children's Hospital, help cure cancer patients, and help them not lose faith of one day being cancer free, so that they too can turn their dreams into reality.

What Does Webster Know?

Taylor Woyvodich

What is cancer?

According to Webster's dictionary, it's "a malignant tumor of potentially unlimited growth that expands locally by invasion and systemically by metastasis". That's the official definition, so that must be what it is.

But is that what you think of?

Some people will tell you that it is a sickness. A sickness...oh, ok. Like a cold, right? But, if it's just like a cold, then why can't it be fixed with a giant box of Kleenex lotion tissues and a bowl of steaming chicken soup? Cancer is not a cold.

Some people will tell you that cancer is a type of evil. Evil...like a Disney villain! How do you stop a Disney villain? Well, let's see. Prince Eric was strong enough to kill Ursula. Can strength stop cancer? No. Well, let's try again. Aladdin outwitted Jafar by tricking him into wanting to become a genie, so that he would be trapped forever. Good idea.

But so far, we haven't been able to outwit cancer. Maybe evil isn't the right definition either.

Maybe to some people, cancer is like a wildfire-it spreads quickly and is difficult to stop. Or it's like a bad dream-you can wake up from it, but it still haunts you during the day. Or maybe it's just like going to the refrigerator on a hot summer day, only to discover you're all out of your favorite ice cream. It gives you that sinking feeling inside, the feeling of disappointment, the feeling that you get when you know that your day isn't going to go the way that you planned.

These are only metaphors. Metaphors are not definitions.

When you hear the word cancer, it means something to each and every one of us. Something different.

When I hear that word, I don't think of a definition. I think of memories.

I think of how weak I felt when I fell in my kindergarten gym class on a typical rainy Washington day. I think of how I immediately knew when something was wrong with my body, because I couldn't get up. How weak I felt and how confused I was. I think about how so much happened so fast, and how I didn't understand any of it. I didn't know why my doctor was so

concerned, and why I had to keep going to the hospital.

All I knew was that I was sick. I couldn't understand any of it.

Maybe cancer is just something that we are incapable of fully understanding.

I have all of these memories of being sick, but that was when I was little. Now I'm a perfectly healthy and normal 17 year old girl, with a perfectly healthy and normal life. I love to drive around in the sunshine with the windows down and blasting my feel-good-about-yourself music. I love to stay up all night with my friends, laughing about nothing and thinking up all of these inside jokes that we'll forget by the next day. I love singing and dancing all around my house without a care in the world. I love to sleep and run and drink coffee and lay in the grass in the summer. I love my family. I love my life, and all of the good that's in it.

And because of this, I sometimes forget. I forget that my parents went through horrible experiences, like trying to raise an infant while caring for a 5-year-old leukemia patient. I forget how much I missed out on in elementary, because I could rarely ever go to school. I forget that I might not have been here to write this essay. I forget that families everywhere are going through this stuff every day. Some are lucky, some are not. And I try to forget that one of my closest friends, and one of the most inspirational people I have ever met, died from cancer last year. I forget because it hurts. It hurts to know that I survived, and she didn't. It hurts to know that not all of us make it through. So we become numb to our feelings, because we can't handle the truth. We forget, because it hurts.

Cancer hurts.

It breaks up families, it tears apart lives. Those who survive, like me, try to forget. Those who don't, people try to forget about, even though they can't. Those who have cancer are remembered constantly. Those who don't have it, forget that it's out there. Those who will get it don't even know its coming.

Cancer affects everyone, everywhere, somehow.

We can't define it.

But, more often than we'd like, it defines us.

You and I

Alexandra Loistl

Dear Mom,

Because of you it only takes that one word to hit me hard. Cancer. It stops the blood running through my veins. It stops the world that's going on around me. I stop to concentrate on what this word means to me, to you, and to others. Yet I do not have a definition of it in my head. Is it some kind of sickness that could ruin us? Or is it something that will be healed like my broken nose during soccer season?

I Googled the word Cancer for days, checked it out on health sites, but still I don't have a clear understanding of what it is. The dictionary tells me: a disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body. But I think cancer has many more meanings than the counts of cells in your body. Cancer means the number of soccer games you'll actually be able to attend this year, how many nights you'll be up with me helping me fix our damn printer for a school project due

the next day yet again, or even how many more lectures I'll receive from you this year about what's right and what's wrong.

It's been just a near 5 months since you've been diagnosed with Cancer, and not once have we talked about it. I push it aside, like its no big deal and you'll get through with it, like you do with everything else. I'm in denial to put it the simple way.

Talking about problems that I'm dealing with or facing has never been the easiest. I've always been a bigger help when we discussed what color shoes you should wear to your function that night, rather than the subject of Cancer. I can't comfort you and tell you everything's ok, because its not. And I sure as hell can't tell you what I'm thinking because I can't even control my own thoughts anymore.

When you left your clumps of beautiful golden hair on the bathroom counter I simply got a Kleenex tissue and covered them up, and went on to doing my own business. When people would ask me where my mom was today, I put a smile on my face and told them 'The Hospital' with no further explanation just like everything was peachy.

Every night, when reality hits, I cry for you. Sometimes hard waking up to a puffy face, but sometimes little tears. In my own selfish matter I think about myself sometimes. I ask myself the big question: What's going to happen to me if something bad happens to you?

If we were your average family we could tell everyone that I'll be just fine, living with my dad and my siblings, continuing to live life without you, but we're not. We're a family of two, just you and I. Don't get me wrong and think I'm blaming you for the summer love you shared with a man in Istanbul, Turkey. I wouldn't have asked for life any other way than just the two of us.

Although it still comes down to the question: What's going to happen to me? Am I going to live with my Grandma who's

soon reaching 80? Am I being shipped off to my "Dad" that I have no recollection of? Will I live

with my aunt who loves her dogs more than anyone else she knows? Or will I be stuck living with my other aunt that already has 2 kids and struggles to keep her house and almost lost it a numerous amount of times?

I hope this decision will never have to be made, and the answer will always be YOU. You're the one I will live with. You're the one that will get through this and live to tell the story. You'll be the one that will help me with my heartbreaks soon to come. You'll teach me everything I need to know about these next 4 years of high school. Although no matter what happens I know one place you'll always be. My heart.

Love,
Me