2010 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

Because You Still Can
by Kaitlyn Barratt

Dear Cancer
by Cameron Young

He Took Me to the Dance
by Marlene Pierce

Little Lead Soldier
by Elizabeth Menstell

My Essay
by Angela Gelfer

My Essay
by Jaella Levien

My Fairytale Life
by Sarah Kintner

My Life Because of Cancer
by Austan Pierce

Patricia
by Lauren Prater

Save You
by Brittany Lukaris

Because You Still Can

Kaitlyn Barratt

My favorite birthday present did not come wrapped in paper with a bow placed delicately on top. In fact, I received it in a square white room, clutching a bottle of hand sanitizer, as "Finding Nemo" played quietly down the hall. Just a few days after my fifteenth birthday I became a statistic, Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. At the age where my most cumbersome decision was what to wear I was diagnosed with childhood cancer. I refused to be just a number, a figure in a pool of percents and fractions. My diagnosis was a curse, but it was more than that, it was a blessing. My experiences have molded me into the person I am proud to be today.

It seems peculiar to the people I meet that I consider cancer to be my "gift." Especially when it began to cripple my ability to do many of the things a normal teenager could. Having Leukemia has had such a profound effect on my character and the way that I perceive the world around me that I would not have chosen any other fate. I now know that life is fragile, and that every moment I am given on this year is precious. I'm determined not to squander away a second of it. I feel that because I was confronted with such a serious situation at a young age that I am a stronger person emotionally. I was also able to learn what is really important in life, like family and dedication to what you really love while most people my age were frittering away their youth on seemingly trivial matters. For this I am grateful because having cancer taught me how to be comfortable with my true self, a concept that most adolescents struggle with.

Having cancer not only shaped who I am, but the person I desire to become as well. I will dedicate my life to helping children like myself who at a young age are challenged by a life altering illness. My goal in life now is to become a pediatric oncologist where my experiences would influence the way I care for patients because I have gained knowledge in the emotional aspects of childhood cancer having experienced them first hand. I was given Leukemia for a reason. Not to grieve and lament my situation, but to enact change and to be an avid supported of other children with this condition.

I am a survivor. I stared calamity in the face and smiled back. I was battling cancer most of my high school career but I still woke up every morning to greet the day. I ran for student council offices, did the best I could in school under the circumstances, and kept myself active and involved because I knew that one day I would be here. I'd be walking across that stage and tossing my cap in the air. I would be admiring the cherry trees at they blossomed on the University of Washington campus as a student, not just a spectator. Now this fall what seemed like a far away possibility is going to become a reality, and I could not be more excited. During treatment I dreamt everyday about the opportunities that lay ahead of me and worried less about what I was leaving behind.

It is not the fact that you are diagnosed with cancer that makes the difference, it is what you take out of the situation. Anyone who has heard the words "you have cancer" has all the reasons in the world to cry, pity themselves, and spend their life in fear, but whatever time you are given is much better spent celebrating the gifts that God has given you. Make the conscious decision to wake up each morning and tell yourself that today you have been blessed with the ability to get up out of bed and just live. That knowledge in itself is the best birthday present I have ever received.

Life happens. It is moments like this that define one's true character. Are you going to back down or stand up to the challenge? Give up or win? I'm embracing every blessed moment I have been given on this earth. I am one of the lucky ones, I have been given a second chance at life and can still awake in the morning a put my dreams into action.

Dear Cancer

Cameron Young

The word cancer, by itself is known to send shivers down peoples' spines. Known to create mass panic, cost thousands of dollars, destroy lives, and take lives. Cancer. When said each person may interpret it differently, a loss of a loved one, a divine story of someone who fought and beat the odds of death. What is cancer? What has the power to drastically change a person's life in one moment in time? To me, cancer is a thief of life and joy, and the giver of pain and sorrow. Cancer, I do not know what you look like or feel like, but what I do know is you have taken people away from my life. I am an 18 year old boy who asks a lot of questions and one I have never been able to ask or answer myself is: what compels you to do so?

Dear Cancer,

The date is January 23, 2010, I am writing on behalf of my family, but most importantly for me. Your name has come up in our family discussions more times than I can count. Even though we have not personally met, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Cameron Young, born September 1991, nephew of Darla Treworgy and grandson of Sharon Parsons. I do not know if we will meet soon or ever in my lifetime, however I would like to talk with you now so you will know where I stand.

You may not be aware of the people I am speaking about, since you are so active, but they are and were two very special people in my life. I want you to know these people on a personal level rather than just inanimate objects. My aunt, strong, bold, and daring, but most importantly, a mom was your first encounter. You tried to take her, away from my family, leave her young kids in this world with no mother, leave me without an aunt, my mom with no sister, and my grandparents without a daughter. The mark you leave does not only affect the one you indulge yourself into, but everyone else around them. You are nothing better than a criminal trying to take what you can from great people in this world. Leaving a scar on everyone you touch, some visible some not, however in the end, they all hurt as bad as the next. You are sneaky as you take different forms to enter undetected into peoples' bodies. Breast Cancer was a nice try; you were close except it was caught early enough forcing you to pack your bags and move on. Even though you left your mark with my aunt Darla in her having to have a mastectomy, you still lost and made all of us stronger for it.

Now the heat is on, bold move to comeback I must say, how cowardly you must be to attack the sweetest lady in my life especially, after she moves away to Arizona with my Papa because they could no longer take the winters in Wenatchee. The one that taught me how to tie my shoes, the one who made me special peanut butter sandwiches on "dough bread", the one who let me ride up front with papa so we could talk on the C.B. radio, the woman who was my Nanny. Upon the thousands of hours I spent with my Nanny and then to hear that Nanny's "very sick" is not something any 10 year old boy or anyone in the world should have to go through. I had no idea of what misfortune had just come into my life. See, I want you to know that every night when I laid crying in my bed, "Wondering what has gone wrong? Is Nanny gonna live?" The hardest question of them all was, "What am I going to do without her?" I may have some sort of an answer to that question today. Although life is undoubtedly different without her in it, life is spent remembering her in it. The anger and rage that built in my heart for what I feared was going to happen was overcome by sorrow and sadness when my mom came home and brought me the news. It felt like my heart had been ripped through my sternum and then jabbed back in with an ice pick. I remember the feeling of my body weighing so much and the extreme effort it took to pick myself up. "Nanny is dead, no, this can't be true!" The disbelief in what had just happened, the fact I could still picture Nanny in my life, still walking in the park, still knitting, and still watching the Price is Right, made this so much harder because I believed she was still alive. There is no doubt in my mind I will forever hold you responsible for not letting me tell her "I love you" one last time. I will always love the woman you took from me. Cancer, you took an idol from a boy. The word grandma was a sensitive one, one that will only be able to be used in the conversation of heaven.

We have our past which has been laid out on the table for us; the ball is in your court. Your composition I am not quite sure of, never the less it is quite apparent that you are lacking a crucial element that every being possesses, a heart. Your intentions are unknown and your existence is questioned, but your presence is felt. If we ever do meet, you need to know I will avenge the loss of my Nanny and you will cease to exist. It's always something that will hurt knowing you took my Nanny.

She may have lost the battle, but she is not lost in my heart.

Sincerely,
Cameron Young
Wenatchee, Washington

He Took Me to the Dance

Marlene Pierce

It was my first high school dance. Homecoming ’09, sophomore year. I hadn’t planned on going, neither I nor my date were big on dancing. Yet, when I finally asked him to go, he said yes. I can assure you that it was the most memorable first date a girl could ever have. All dolled up in my dress with my hair curled, I put on heels to look taller next to my six foot escort. I walked out of my room to see my date standing there wearing a tux. Where my father found the tux I’ll never know. “You ready to go Dad?” I asked. His answer was a quick yes.

My father was diagnosed with cancer the summer of ’07. In the early stages, we were all hopeful that he would be the one to beat the odds. But cancer is a resilient foe, and soon it became clear that we might not have all the time we wanted. I found myself having to deal with the very real possibility that Daddy might not always be there. I worried that he might never see his grandchildren. That he’d never get the joy of interrogating the first boyfriend, and no doubt all who followed after, I brought home. That he might never walk me down the isle. I remember crying in his arms, telling him all my worries, and I remember asking him to take me to homecoming.

The night of the dance, we were running an hour late. I didn’t care though. I was the luckiest girl in Lake Stevens. I remember that as we got out of the car, the other late arrivals were all pointing and whispering, trying to figure out which football player I had brought to the dance. I remember my dad’s chuckle as he overheard them. My dad had tumors up and down his spine, around his pelvis, and in the nerve bed of his foot. It’s a miracle he could walk at all. But nothing stopped us from hobbling our way down that school isle and slow dancing. We both cried as the music slowed and he said the three words all teenage girls dream of, “I love you.”

We could only dance for forty minutes before we had to leave because of the pain from his tumors. But that forty minutes will last me a lifetime. It was my first dance at my wedding, it was my dad walking me down the isle, his smile was that of a proud dad seeing his daughter graduate. We packed forty years into those forty minutes.

A short time after the dance, my father passed out. He was rushed to the hospital where they discovered that a tumor had broken through his C-7 vertebrae in his spine and that he had no bone supporting his neck. Further tests revealed that his back had probably been this way for a few months. My father had been walking around with no spine supporting his head, yet he had taken me to the dance. He would never walk again.

My father passed away on July 19th 2009. He was strong until the end and I know that he is watching over us from heaven. I see it in the small wonder of life. I keep him alive in the sunrise, in the smell of exhaust from the trucks he so dearly loved to work on, in the smile of my little sisters face. Though my time with my dad was cut painfully short, I will always have the memories of him. Of how much he loved he. Of our first and last dance. I know that he’s looking down at me and smiling. I’m confident that he would be proud of the women I am becoming. Daddy, if your looking down reading this, I just want to say thank you for all you taught me. I love you Dad.

This is a poem I wrote for my Dad’s funereal:
Daddy
His slow breath
His slow death
Me constantly trying
to stay strong
As my dad was dying

A new Life
A new Strife
Such a different outlook
That began
When his life was took

Surviving
Striving
Just wanting to remember
His life
To stoke memories like an ember

And Now His Love
Is so far above
The earth which we a living
Now the angels
Celebrate the spirit of his giving

His Smile
His kisses
Though it make me sad
From now on
I’m just celebrating dad

The good times
the bad times
I know we’ll make it through
I love you dad
~from your baby girl to you

Little Lead Soldier

Elizabeth Menstell

Christmas morning 2009 started early as usual. My Aunt came into my room at the crack of dawn to wake me up. I pulled on my light blue robe and hobbled out to the lit living room where my Dad, little Sister, and Aunt were sitting. The tall tree (taller then everyone in the family) was shining with multicolor lights and an eclectic arrangement of ornaments. There were six overflowing stockings sitting on the living room chairs- one less then last year. After digging through our stockings, we were ready to open our presents under the tree. The presents under the tree were wrapped in two ways; some were in Christmas paper, the others were in Christmas decorated cloth bags (my Grandmother's eco-friendly way to save paper). The "elf" (my little sister) began giving each family member a gift. I was on my fourth or fifth present when it happened. I opened the draw string gift bag to reveal a Spanish study guide. My Mom then asked if there was anything else in the bag as I started to toss it into the pile of wrappings. I reached in and felt around the "S" shaped white packaging peanuts; when I felt something with a smooth texture. I pulled out a small, hard object wrapped in Kleenex. I unwrapped the surprise gift. It was a small, hand-painted lead soldier. I recognized it instantly; it was one of the soldiers of my grandfather's vast collection. It was my Granddad's stocking, the seventh stocking, that was missing from the living room that Christmas day.

My grandfather was diagnosed with Chronic Myelomonocytic Leukemia (CMML) when he was 69, in 2006. CMML is a very rare form of leukemia. According to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, CMML affects approximately three out of 100,000 individuals in the United States this year. It is a difficult cancer to treat and lasting remissions are not common. Survival averages only 12 to 24 months after the start treatment. It started with anemia and the loss of red blood cells. The white blood cells then began to take over and push out more of the red. The cancer made Granddad feel exhausted.

Granddad began collecting lead soldiers at an early age. His Grandmother brought them back from a trip to England for him and his younger brother. As a small boy growing up in Hamtramck, Michigan I'm sure he had no idea that his handful of soldiers, ranging from Zulu worriers and Hussars to Scottish marching bands, would grow to a collection of over 1,700.

The treatment for the leukemia started right away. The doctor first gave my grandfather human growth shots once a month. The shots helped the bone marrow produce more red blood cells. This treatment went on for six months and then it didn't work very well anymore. He started taking chemotherapy pills, and receiving blood transfusions. This worked for a while, but unfortunately, because the doctors did not have the precise treatment, the pills did not work to Granddad's entire advantage. They killed both the cancerous white blood cells plus the healthy red cells.

Granddad collected lead solders into his retirement. He would order them on a regular basis from websites like EBay. Some he hand painted. He displayed his favorites on glass shelves next to his computer. Many soldiers were also displayed in my Granddad's hobby room. A room dedicated to his collections, located across from the guest bedroom I always slept in. As a little girl, I was always a bit intimidated to enter the room with a thousand or so small soldiers on display. The soldiers wore painted uniforms of different colors, determining what army they belonged to. I remember thinking about the movie “Toy Story”, and how the soldiers in the movie came alive at night.

Granddad continued to take the chemotherapy pills to alleviate some of the symptoms of cancer. However, soon more medical help was needed. It was at church where I saw my Grandfather become physically exhausted. He stopped standing to sing the hymns, and soon he stopped singing all together. He was still cheery and talkative at church, but at home he had slipped into a depression-like state. My sister and I weren’t playfully teased anymore. Instead of talking about light hearted subjects, we heard about Granddad’s trips to the “vampire doctor” (he received many blood transfusions because the chemotherapy was not curing him). On transfusion days he came home for dinner renewed, it was like eating with a different person. Talkative and up-beat; he had turned back to his old self. Soon, the transfusions stopped helping. He stopped volunteering at the White Center Food Bank with my Grandmother on Wednesdays. He stopped coming to church. He was bedridden. After two rounds of infusion chemotherapy Granddad passed away Monday, April 20, 2009. He died in bed with my Grandmother, sitting at his side. I wondered if he had been scared during his run with cancer, but my Grandmother assures me that he was tired and as a Christian, he was ready to go on to his next life.

After his death we had a memorial service and two cemetery services. He has been put to rest, half of the ashes here in Seattle, the other half in Michigan, at the foot of his youngest sister’s grave. All there was left to do was to work on my Grandfather’s estate. We had to go through the basement, count, and categorize all that was left of my Grandfather’s collections and mementos. We found that he had 1,700 lead soldiers! We counted, tallied and took pictures of them, it was a long process. When we had finally finished, I asked my Mom if I could have one of the hand-painted lead soldiers to remember Granddad and my time with him. Her answer was uncertain, since it was really my grandmother’s decision; I decided not to pester her about it again. Months passed, and soon it was the 2009 holiday season, the first without Granddad in my life. The space he left when he died had still not healed.

My Grandfather has passed on but a part of him will stay with me forever. I will remember his faith, his determination, and his sense of humor as I live out the rest of my life; and I will take that little soldier with me on my journey, as a special keepsake, wherever I go.

I keep the little lead soldier in my closet and see it whenever I am getting ready in the morning and getting ready for bed at night. Each time I see it I remember him. I think about how he is watching over me, about our time together, and I think about the legacy of soldiers he left behind. “Goodnight Granddad, see you in the morning”.

My Essay

Angela Gelfer

“It’s not a pretty story.” She says, and takes a bite of food.

I smile. “Go ahead and just tell me.”

“Okay, well, I was twenty-two years old, newly married, when my mom told me that my sister Angela called. She was sick, running fevers, in Italy. So we told her to come home. We took her to the doctor, and he said that he suspected she had cancer. My sister was thirty-two. We took her to Scripps Institute in San Diego and we found out that my sister had lung cancer that had metastasized and was inoperable. She was thirty-two and there was nothing they could do to help her. So she ended up going home – they didn’t have chemo or whatever. The only thing we could think to do for her was Laetrile, it was like an apricot pit type thing, and the only thing you could do to get it was to smuggle it out of Mexico so my niece and I did that. I was always so scared because they’d check the cars. And she began taking that, but the doctor gave her six months because she was young and the cancer was aggressive.” She looks away for a while with her eyes unfocused.

“So we went back to the doctors and continued to run tests, but there was nothing we could do, so I ended up quitting my job to go help her. The Laetrile made her sick all the time, and she just started to deteriorate – couldn’t eat, constant vomiting, bedridden. I would make her protein shakes and clean her apartment and take care of her; then we decided that we were going to go to Palm Springs where my uncle had a house. During the day we could order meals from his restaurant and do puzzles and enjoy the sun. One day as a joke we went to this store and bought these wigs, my sister always had this dark hair, and she bought this platinum blonde wing and we went to a bar and these guys were buying us drinks because they thought we were so cute!

“Then my mother came to visit – which was a nightmare – just condemning how we handled it. She would sit with my sister every day and they worked through twenty years of bad feelings – you want to hear all this?”

“Whatever you want to say, I’ll hear.” I say with what I hope is a reassuring grin.

“I’m sorry this is so jumbled, there are all these things that keep popping into my head, like how we would play Scrabble, and I’d steal her clothes, and we’d talk about what it would be like when she got better – we never thought she’d actually die. I think it would’ve been better if she had just been hit by a car and I didn’t have to watch as she faded away right before my eyes…

“My sister didn’t want my mom there – too negative. Then we went back to my sister’s apartment; her kids were staying somewhere else at the time – she had two kids. So I slept in a chair and took care of her while she was in the bed and she slowly started to lose weight: she dissolved before my eyes until she was like a skeleton. Around the fifth month she forgot who I was; she was hallucinating. She thought I was Lisa, her daughter, and she cried a lot when she slept. But she never complained about the pain; it must have been excruciating, but she never once complained.

“During the day I would have her next-door neighbor come over and watch her while I went to the market and brought fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, whole grain bread, natural everything, and I would make her these shakes because at that point she could only handle liquid food. She was on oxygen and the doctor was making house calls at this point, and I’d, uh, clean her bed, and give her sponge bathes and check her tubes, and had to turn the breathing higher every day. She was about 100 lbs at this point, she went down to 45lbs, lost her hair, lost her teeth. The only time I could escape her was when I went downstairs to do the laundry. I would sit on the washing machine and just cry and cry – she was so deformed, she looked like a monster because of her sickness.” She pauses at this point and begins to cry quietly. Her voice has begun to break with the tears clotting the back of her throat and I allow her the moments of silence to handle all the emotions. I wait for her to begin again when she can.

“Are you okay?” she asks, thinking of me, thinking of the other person as she always does. “I’m sorry, I just haven’t talked about this in so long. You would’ve liked my sister. You would’ve really liked her – she was a lot like you. She drove me crazy but she was so much like you. I miss her so much.”

“Tell me about her,” I say.

“Where was I?” She wipes a tear.

“The laundry room.”

“I used to cry so much, that I had to use the clean towels to wipe my face and then I’d have to wash them again. She didn’t want any unhappy people there so I’d have to put on a happy face all the time. She thought the crying was bad energy that fed the cancer. I left my husband and quit my job when we were newlyweds to take care of her, and the only place I could cry was the laundry room. It was like my prison.

“She started to look really old, being twenty-two as I was, she looked very old to me. I’m fifty-four now, so you can figure out how long ago that was. Her breathing got really short like in little – like in little catches, so I called my mom and my dad and told them to come visit her because it was getting really bad. I’ll never forget my mom coming in. She had her hair piled up on her head and make up on and a fancy shirt. She looked so pretty, and my dad looked very stern. I told her not to be negative, but the first time my mom went in to see her she started crying – it made me so mad. It was just days and days of watching her in the bed. Her breathing got worse and worse, and Greg was constantly calling and asking how she was doing and when I’d come home, and I just didn’t know. Between the medicines and the sleeping in the chair, I didn’t know whether I was coming or going. I was twenty two years old. There was this constant repeating everyday of going to the market and scrubbing the apartment and cleaning her, and then one night she said she didn’t want a bath. I was sitting there next to her, and she was on the highest level of oxygen, and her breathing was so bad, like tiny baby hiccups, like a fish out of water. She kept calling me Lisa, my niece's name, and telling me she loved me." She pauses to catch her breath.

"She just kept gasping for breath, and I looked at her and she had lost all her hair, and she looked like a skeleton, like someone from a concentration camp. She didn't even look like herself, she was always so beautiful, she always looked so beautiful. And I was sitting there in the dark holding her hand…" she sobs and places her hands over her face.

"And I was holding her hand, and everything was quiet; there was the whoosh of the machine, but I didn't hear her little hiccup breaths anymore. I knew she was gone. So I just sat there waiting for twenty minutes or so before I turned on the light and could see that she had died. I saw that she had a smile on her face. Just before she had told me she was very tired and ready, and I asked, 'Ready for what?', but she never answered me. I turned the oxygen off, and adjusted the covers, and closed her eyes, and then I called the police. I waited for an hour and a half for someone to show up. While I waited I cleaned the apartment, and brushed her hair, what little she had left, and put a little lipstick on her. I went in the bathroom and looked in the mirror, and I didn't even recognize myself – I had lost so much weight. I called my husband, and told him I was coming home. He was so excited – he thought that someone was there to relieve me – but I corrected him. I didn't cry when she died, I didn't cry; I did all my crying in the laundry room." I notice she's twisting her wedding ring anxiously.

"The thing I noticed about all this was how pathetic people thought she was when she was sick. I couldn't understand how people stayed so far away, stayed so distant, like she was contagious or something. Cancer is sad, as you die, you begin to smell like death. I'll never forget that smell. It's like a foul, decaying smell that consumes you. And all this is why you're named Angela. I loved my sister so much, and she never got to meet you." She sobs again. This is my mother, sitting on a couch in our living room, crying quietly as she tells me, again, what it was like for her to lose her sister.

"I'm so sorry." She says, as she buries her face in her hands to wipe away her tears. "But you can see now why your name is so important to me – she died this deteriorating death and then years later there was this new beautiful baby girl and it was like she was reborn, like everything that was good in her here again. I knew the day she died I would name my daughter after her, and when you were born with those dark eyes and ark hair: you look so much like her. She never met you – but she knows you. She knows you."

I stand up, and hug my mother and try to quiet her tears. It's hard for me to remember that these 48 minutes were more than 5 months of my mother's life, ones that former her character, and in many ways mine as well. When I was a girl, I never liked my name because I always felt as if it were never truly *mine*, as if it belonged to someone else as well. And that's true – it really isn't all together mine; but at this point I accept that, and even celebrate it, because if my name can help my mom forget the smell and decay and the tears that cancer caused, then I would gladly give it, today and every day. Because the point of this story isn't that my aunt had cancer- it's that my aunt faded away as my mother watched, and that something as small as a baby girl and a name on a birth certificate could give her back the best friend that cancer stole from her.

I have known many beautiful, extraordinary men and women who have struggled with cancer of the breast, lung, and bone. I saw as a close family friend, April, slowly succumbed to cancer over five years, but no sufferer could affect me more than the one who I think of every time I write my name on a piece of paper, the hole in my family tree, the one who I never met, but would give anything to see, if only for a moment.

My Essay

Jaella Levien

I’m eleven, and I have a pained look on my face. Cracker crumbs from my Lunchables and stubborn, salty tears fall to the floor of my grandpa’s Ford truck. We’ve been driving for hours now, and we have stopped at two places already. My mother and grandpa are tired and scared; they haven’t told me anything yet, and I still don’t know what’s wrong with me.

My back pains me to the point where I can’t stand up, not without help. My cough is deep and piercing. The pressure it puts on my back is unbearable, and I can’t hold back the tears or involuntary sobbing. My doctor says nothing much is wrong with me. I think the pain is serious, but maybe my pain threshold has lowered somehow, and I just need to buck up. I put on a happy face for my brothers and sisters and try to live normally from day to day. I can’t hide the pain any longer, though. Whimpers leap unbidden and unconsciously from my lips. I think of the local doctor we visit multiple times a week, and wonder why she still doesn’t know what’s wrong with me.

I roll into the third and final hospital I visit that day. My mom pushes me in one of those complimentary wheelchairs they keep at all hospital emergency room entrances. An hour and a half of waiting and of tests: blood pressure, blood samples, temperature checks, more x-rays, urine samples, and, thank god, lots of intra-venous pain medications for me. Now a woman walks into the room, and closes the door inconspicuously behind her. All becomes silent except for the constant soft beep of the I.V. pole attached to my hand by long, clear tubes. She discusses my symptoms with my mother, my grandpa, and me. She says what I have is acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, or ALL. She tells me, in a nutshell, that I have cancer. Surprisingly, I’m in some strange way happy about my diagnosis. The cancer means that I’ll finally be able to get some treatment. And the cancer means that I’m not weak and sickly, but that I’ve actually survived longer than most do without a diagnosis. I’ve pushed myself through the last half a year believing that I just complain too much, that I needed to buck up and move on. I tell myself that it has been hard. And yes, the hardest part is still to come. But if I could survive half a year without being treated for cancer, I can survive the next two and a half being treated for it.

There are things that happen to people that irrevocably change them, some people change for the good; others change and become less than they were before. When I had a run in with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, I went through such a change. And, I believe, it changed me for the good. It helped shape me into the independently driven and persistent person I have become. Before I was diagnosed, I learned to take care of my body and my mind the best I could, when the doctor could not give me any clear answers, or functional treatments. During my treatment, I handled my medications and doses independently and successfully, this gave my mother one less reason for worry. Emotionally, I found the strength to continue with the painful and stressful schedule of treatments, without putting further stress on my family members. I had to learn to take care of myself to survive. The need to undergo painful, deteriorating, and at times frightening or dangerous treatments required that I be persistent and strong. The refusal to accept or postpone any treatment could have been even more hazardous to my health.

The years of treatment I received were marked with only minimal resistance from me, despite my dislike or fear of any given treatment. I persisted through everything because I knew it was in my best interest. My persistence and my drive helped me to achieve peace- a peace with myself in knowing that I was doing all that I could, without reservation, to better myself. Having to fight so hard to survive put life into a perspective that I don't think most people get the change to see; it made everything worth fighting for.

The character traits I have developed through my experience with cancer have shaped my life today. My independence, my persistence, my drive, my strength, and my determination, will help me in the future, as they have helped me in the present. I am strong because I have experienced such adversity. When I focus on an area of my life, I excel through my own character. Once you have become a cancer survivor, you never go back.

My Fairytale Life

Sarah Kintner

"Every man's life is a fairy-tale written by God's fingers."-Hans Christian Anderson. My life, however, does not mimic any fairytale that I know. I never have pricked my finger on a spindle. I have never lived with seven dwarves. I did, on the other hand, live with a brother who, as a college football player, ate and made enough mess to add up to seven dwarves. I do believe though that God has written a grand fairy-tale in my life: full of normalcy, then a downward spiral into the belly of the beast, support from a fairy godmother (or a whole team of them), and a fairy tale-like happy ending.

As an adolescent, my life was as normal as the next teen's life. My middle class suburban family life would be described as idyllic. I grew up in a family of four; I didn't come from a broken home. We went to church every Sunday. I participated in little league sports and district musicals and watched my brother play high school and college football. I was a successful student throughout my educational career, never getting less than a B on a report card. I excelled in performing on the flute. College beckoned. Life was unfolding nicely. That is, until September 29, 2008. On that day, the axis of my world shifted 180 degrees. The week prior to this, I began to feel odd. Bumps emerged on the back of my neck. I fell prey to fevers and nose bleeds. On September 29, 2008, a visit to the doctor changed my world.

I remember vividly that too cold, too rainy day. The emergency room contained at least 20 waiting patients, but we immediately were ushered through the throng of sniffling noses, queasy stomachs and damaged ankles. In the exam room, my best friend's mother, an MD, told me the bad news. The diagnosis revealed either Lymphoma or Leukemia, and further testing had to be done. Within four hours, my parents and I arrived at Seattle Children's Hospital. The downward spiral from my idyllic life had begun.

Over the next few days, we endured piles of paperwork, and many phone calls, body fluid tests, IV blood draws, and bone marrow pokes. I have never prayed harder than what I did that week.

I was diagnosed with AML, or Acute Myelogenous Leukemia. The news came, as it would to anyone, as a huge blow. I burst into tears. Really? How could I get cancer? There was too much to accomplish with college visits and recitals, homework and church activities.

Upon formal diagnosis, the medical staff immediately started chemotherapy. Just as immediately, my blood was free of cancerous cells. The next several months brought on seemingly unending rounds of chemotherapy to fight through. Anger towards God rattled through me during that dark time. What had I done to deserve getting cancer? Surely there was someone more deserving than me. Miraculously my health looked up. I knew God had answered our prayers and that we were on a straight course to the finish line called the fairy tale happy ending.

I became strong enough to leave the hospital for a few days between treatments. One furlough from AML Jail came just before Christmas. On Christmas Eve, things, once again, turned for the worst. That day, I felt a little odd so I skipped dinner to sleep. I woke up Christmas morning unable to get out of bed. I barely had enough strength to lift my head. I would have done anything not to go back to the hospital though so I desperately tried to show no pain. My parents, emotionally drained from seeing me so unwell, took me back to Seattle

Children’s. Within an hour of admission, I went in to Septic Shock. Severely dehydrated, the ER doctors vacuum pumped five liters of fluid into me.

I spent nearly three weeks in the PICU (Pediatric Initial Care Unit), puffy with fluid retention, in an induced coma. This was the belly-of-the-beast in my fairy tale life. Hooked to a ventilator, kidney dialysis machine, IV monitors on my soaring temperature, dropping blood pressure, and fluttering heart rate, I fought to survive. The only thing I remember from that time is a dream conversation with a friend of mine who died a few years ago in a car crash. She told me to say hello to her mom for her when I got back. When I got over the short-term memory loss following those weeks to Neverland, my parents reminded me of one night in the ICU. They said I had hallucinated, asking where Mikayla’s mother was. I had told them I needed to tell her something. I believe that this was God’s way of sending me a sign that this world wasn’t done with me yet. The next few days showed signs of improvement. I began to pull through. I owe those doctors and nurses (team fairy godmother) my life many times over.

That number equals the amount of doctors each day that made the decisions that helped me to arrive at where I am today. I finished my last round of chemotherapy and left the hospital for good on March 20, 2009. Without the fairy tale-like healing powers of the Seattle Children’s medical staff, I would be dead.

I feel that this whole cancer ordeal has made me a much stronger and mature person. My life perspective has changed dramatically since my diagnosis date, exactly four hundred and twenty-eight days ago. I now know not to take anything for granted: the smells, the people, and the atmosphere. My life remains strong, and I know I have reached my happily-ever-after. I love my one-of-a-kind fairy tale life, as it has molded me into the person I am today.

My Life Because of Cancer

Austan Pierce

As an athletic boy of 11 years old, cancer is the last thing on your mind. That is until you hear the last thing you ever expected to hear, “You have cancer”. I remember lying in the hospital room late on the night of October 17, 2003, after completing an MRI. It was around 11 o’clock when my doctor entered my room giving my parents and me the news that would instantly change our lives forever. I had a type of bone cancer called Ewing’s Sarcoma. Most kids and even adults tend to associate the word “cancer” with the word “death”, so as you can imagine I was scared. I was scared to have to leave my family. I was scared to leave my friends. I was scared that I would be facing enormous amounts of pain. And the worst part was, everything was out of my control. Prior to all of this, the doctors had misdiagnosed me multiple times. Six months later when they finally had me lay through an hour and half long, loud, obnoxious MRI, the tumor was the size of a cantaloupe making my left pelvis its home.

The next year would end up being the most critical year of the whole process of saving my life. I started out with 5 different types of chemotherapy. Every third week when I had to go in for a new dose of chemo, it became harder and harder on my body. I vomited more than I ever thought was possible as the so called “medication” seemed to slowly kill my body from the inside, out. It got to the point I just flat-out refused to eat or drink anything as long as I was on hospital property. Certain restaurants’ commercials on television would make me extremely sick, so every time one would come on my family would simultaneously dive for the remote to change the channel. It was a combination of starving myself and vomiting that made me, previously a 5’8” 110 lbs. boy, become a 5’8” 77 lbs. boy. Looking back at pictures, I can’t believe that I ever looked so thin and frail. I lost all my hair and, being as young as I was, was embarrassed to go out in public without a hat. Another side affect from the chemo was that it didn’t just kill cancer cells, but my blood cells as well. This meant I couldn’t go out in public for about two weeks after each round of chemo, unless I wanted to risk catching an illness and not be able to fight if off. This caused me to miss a couple years of school. Although I did stay caught up at home, I missed out socializing with all of my friends making us start to grow apart. That set me behind a lot for the later high school years.

In the midst of my chemotherapy, I had to have radiation. I thought it was going to be easy considering I made it through all but the last day of the one minute treatments. It was that last day though that made me think otherwise. The night of my last treatment I quickly found out that I could no longer sit due to the horrific sunburn-like burn that the radiation had given me. Every time something would touch the radiated skin I would yell out from the intensity of the pain. Luckily though, that was temporary. After a month of radiation I was down to just chemo again.

While chemotherapy and radiation killed most of the cancer cells, I had to have part of my pelvis removed and replaced with a cadaver bone in order to help completely remove all the cells. After that surgery, I all but lost the function in my left leg. Strike one. I don’t know how many people realize this but only being able to move one leg made it pretty much impossible to walk. In order to try and give me the use of my left leg back, my orthopedic surgeon put a cement spacer in my pelvis due to a deep rooted infection. It got a surgical infection. Strike two. They then, went in to rid my body of the infection. I still had no use of my left leg. Strike three. After two and a half years of living life in a wheelchair, being held back by essentially the “dead weight" of my leg, my surgeons and I realized I had to have it amputated in order to live life to the fullest. It took me a few months to get my parents on board with the idea though. Aside from that October in 2003, the biggest life changing day I have had was December 13, 2006. That was the day that I underwent a 5 hour surgery. I left my school in the middle of freshman year with 4 limbs and returned the last part of freshman year with less than four. I had a hemi-pelvectomy amputation, meaning I have no left leg at all. Going back to school after that scared me to death. Would everyone accept me? Would anyone discriminate? What would my friends say? Would they stare? I was blessed to be at a school I was in because I know the transition wouldn't have been as easy for me without all the people who my life was surrounded with those four years. For that I will forever be grateful.

After over 70 surgeries, some major and some minor, I have learned the hard way that when one door closes another door opens. I was forced to give up able-bodied sports, but am now playing on a nationally ranked wheelchair basketball team. Fighting my way through cancer has helped me open my eyes to the world around me. I don't take life for granted anymore and have become more mature and responsible from having to play with the hand I was dealt. I can sometimes get carried away and let the child inside me make an appearance, but I don't really care because I had to have adult qualities during my childhood. Now and then people stare, but I don't care anymore. I actually wish they would just come up and ask me about it. I respect little kids for that reason. They are never afraid to ask. It is always the adult that comes in, swoops them up, ad whisks them away whenever they bring up the subject in front of me. I love who I am, and if I could go back and change my life, I would pass up the opportunity to do so. I try to live every day like it is my last. I truly enjoy life and all that it has to offer. I strive to do my part in raising cancer awareness. I have done a lot of public speaking on the issue and made lifelong friends because of everything that has happened to me. I have also been lucky enough to help comfort and inform other amputees and their families prepare for the surgery.

Cancer will forever be a big part of my life. I realize that I am one of the lucky ones. I have made numerous friends that went through the same battles that I did and weren't as fortunate as me. The general public doesn't realize exactly how many people cancer affects every day. And no one, not even my family or the oncologists of this world know what it is like to battle something so strong, fast, and ruthless as cancer unless they themselves were the ones standing at the front of the battle line, laying in that lonely, cold, scary, hospital bed.

Patricia

Lauren Prater

Her voice broke. She muffled her sobs. I strained my ears and fought the apple-sized wad of emotions lodged snugly and permanently in my throat. This was it. This was goodbye. She was calling me to say goodbye. Her handwriting – so beautiful and lovely – will no longer scrawl across elegant, scented, birthday cards. Her soft voice will no longer say hello to me on the telephone. Her elaborately designed attire, that was always much too sophisticated for whichever occasion it was worn, will no longer smell like vintage perfume.

I called her Nama. And she had stage four pancreatic, lung, and kidney cancer. It just *spread*. She was never the type to listen to a doctor – nor the type to give herself a break. Running a highly-acclaimed Bed and Breakfast with only the help of a cook and one maid; she was my 70-something-year old, beautiful, super-hero grandmother. In my sophomore year of high school, my family's awareness and involvement in Nama's health troubles accelerated. My Mom was with her – her mother – through it all, and my Dad and brother complimented my ghastly cooking while she was gone. We held onto every ounce of attainable hope. My house was mother-less on Mother's Day. But that's because my Mom was needed. By her own Mom

Everything was put into perspective that year. The value of family, and every memory created. Nama's intellect, her spoiled dogs, her appreciation for the arts, her secretive and intriguing past; those comforts shown through the pain – like a beam of sunlight on the California Coast in which she resided. Death met her two and a half months after we knew that cancer was indeed, the culprit.

I wrote her a letter. Not doing so would have been a figurative death of me. At least then, it would have been. "This is just me speaking, Nama. No format; no structure," I wrote, breathing deeply. I told her how much I admired her. I told her now hard I've cried. I told her how I wished I knew her better. I thanked her for everything she's given me. I thanked her for being my Nama. I told her I'm going to go by "Nama" when I'm a grandmother. I wrote the lyrics of my favorite song, by Matchbox Twenty. The lead singer wrote the song when his own mother was dying of cancer. The words were like liquid – flowing from my heart onto the blank sheets of notebook paper. It was only two pages. But it was enough.

For me writing is like breathing. And mu letter to my grandmother was the most liberating form of closure I ever hoped to have. She read it, and wept to my Mom, who was kneeling on her bedside, touched by my simple words. Nama passed away the following day.

Again, I strained by ears, desperate to soak up every exhaled breath and broken sentence. "Goodbye, honey. I love you…and this…is my time. I hope I've been good to you in your life. You will have such a beautiful life. I'm…so emotional, Lauren. I love you." And that was it. A numb, lost feeling following the conversation. That same feeling distinguished itself, into a searing pain, following her death the very next day. But it was alright. Words have power – and words were exchanged. Words of love. Words of happiness. Words that can touch one's soul and make them yearn for something more. Wherever Nama is, she's smiling. Right now. And because of that truth – I'm at ease.

Save You

Brittany Lukaris

Dear Mom,

At first I didn't know if I should write this essay, I felt selfish for writing it because I considered that I would be exploiting you, but as I write this now, with tears streaming down my face I under stand now why I'm writing it. I'm writing this for you and for me, for strangers to see another perspective on a situation that became a living hell it can all be. I realized cancer is blind; it does not judge you by the color of your skin or by the morals and values you live by, it never judges it only chooses. It embraces the body like a deadly spirit, which comes and goes as it pleases or it can take you away all together in one simple motion of its hand. When you were first diagnosed with stage four lung cancer what instantly came to my mind was death. I thought about how many school drama productions you would miss, about how you'll never be there smiling at me as I took my diploma or watch me walk down the aisle at my wedding, and even just being there to tell me you love me
before I go to bed at night.

I remember your first chemotherapy appointment, the autumn sunshine flowing through windows and the heart rate monitor a reassuring noise at the moment, it took up the silence and was just a kind reminder that you were still here, still with me. Your skin was as pale as the pastel moon from the night before and your beautiful mocha brown hair was gone. Only thing familiar about you that day were your intent cerulean eyes watching the CSI rerun with Aunt Lori, talking about mindless, simple things that made it seem like you weren't in a hospital, but at home. We both wanted really wanted to forget we were here for one minute and just think that nothing was wrong. Unlike you though I felt to numb to be able to forget I just watched everything as if a movie, like a Shakespearean tragedy before my own eyes; beautiful and painful.

To be fairly honest I wanted to be so mad at you that day, for having me sit there and watch the drip of chemicals enter your body. I would feel my chest tighten up and tears burn my eyes for all I wanted to do was blame and hate you for smoking for so long, for never taking care of yourself as much as your body deserved. To selfishly feel the anger for making us all go through this nightmare. Every time I got angry I thought about how much it hurt to watch you go through all the treatments and surgeries, and all I could do was just watch. I suppose the only reason why I was angry was because I was hurting so much. I wanted so badly to be like supergirl and just make the disease stop and just expel it from your body so it never would come back again. Unfortunately life doesn't work that way at all, even though I wish it did. All I could do right then was just reach over and hold your hand and give a gentle squeeze that said a thousand 'I love yous' and "You'll pull through'.

I wanted to save you mom as you took in the drugs that day, to search for the cure or the simple answer that would take it all away, but being a fourteen year old girl could only get you so far with those goals. Reason said you should have died 4 years ago on July 16th 2006 when the diagnosis was withering and the world seemed darker then the storm cloud skies that were the forecast for that night. You survived the worst to offer; you made it threw the appointments and the side effects of the tarceva and found peace in every radiation and chemotherapy treatment you had. I think back to the times when you were close to death with hollow breathes and long nights in Swedish Hospital, when you had your brain surgery and could barley create a coherent sentence. I find mercy in the memories of the hospital chapel holding your hand and staring into the candle light for my prayers and answers. Here we are now in 2010; you've been to my drama productions, helped me get ready for homecoming, we've fought over grades and made up over ice cream and movies. You're a living miracle in my mind mom, through all of the obstacles and through all of this pain I found hope in your smile, faith in your words, and strength in your eyes. No matter what happens mom you'll always be in my heart, forever and always.

Love,
Your Bambina