2012 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

Better Than Before

Kelsey Payne

As I sat in the car on the way to the shop, I thought about the purchase I was about to make. Possibilities filled my head, and I began pondering over options. What length should it be? What color, what style? Will it be the same as the other girls or will I stand out from the rest? While contemplating all of this, I ran my fingers through my hair and piled the coarse, dull strands upon my lap, as i f it didn't bother me; as if I felt no urge to cry like I had that morning, as the shower washed away what lifeless strands had remained sitting atop my head, making me realize that the process was speeding. No, this was not a time for tears, I told myself; it is a time for strength. Mom and Dad were there and I knew that what I was going through was just as hard on them-as it was on me, so when we walked into that shop, I was going to strut through the aisles like we were picking out my prom dress, not a wig to hide my near hairless scalp.

Entering the store was a shocking experience. The number of porcelain mannequins staring back at me, wearing styled hair pieces and stoic expressions was, to say the least, intimidating. My goal for the day was to pick a wig, put it on, and get out of that creepy shop and back to my bed as soon as possible, but after making my selection I realized I wouldn't be able to nurse the exhaustion quite yet; the wig, the shop owner explained, would need to be steamed and styled before I could take it home, so we could either wait around a while or come back another day, leaving my thin mess of hair uncovered a bit longer. Weighing the options, going home seemed like the best plan for my parents and I , so we began to get ready to go to the car. During my tired walk towards the exit door, my plans were shattered as I noticed a shiny electric razor sitting atop the back counter, calling my name. I explained to my parents that there was one thing we had to do before leaving the shop^ and in my first step towards emotional recovery I personally shaved what dying hair I had left, laughing and crying through it all. Cancer, I decided, had controlled enough of my life already in the few months since my diagnoses, and losing my hair was going to be one thing that happened on my time.

Cancer would no longer run my life. I never chose to have Leukemia, but I could choose how I let it affect me. I could be a passive victim, hoping and praying that I would make it out alive and maybe I would; maybe it would all pass in time, and I would be able to block out all my memories of this traumatic experience, getting back to life as it was before. Instead, I chose to not only survive, but to beat cancer. I chose to fight like hell and strive to be better than who I was before. I chose to turn cancer into the most positive experience it could possibly be, because I knew it was God's way of letting me know that it was time to shape up, and so I did. Cancer changed my life more than one could ever imagine. Depressed and disinterested in family, friends, and school, I was more lost than I could describe at fourteen years old. When I got sick, I knew my life would change, I just didn't realize it would be for the better. I won't say that I enjoyed treatment, because I didn't and no one does. Cancer is awful, chemo is awful, but living a life without meaning, I've decided, is much worse. God sent me a blessing in disguise, and I thank him every day for doing so. I became determined to be better than who I was in every single way because if I can survive cancer, I know now, I can do anything. I look at life with such a different attitude than before, taking on challenges with enthusiasm, and a desire for greatness. With the help of my amazing family, my friends, and of course, an amazing Oncology staff at Mary Bridge, I am proud to say I finished Chemotherapy treatments in June of 2010 with a newly acquired lust for life that I had never imagined before becoming a Cancer Survivor. I know now, and hope to inspire others to remember that every moment of life is a gift, and you have to make the most of it. Every year on February 28, my family celebrates with a special dinner followed by a toast. Why do I toast to my diagnoses and not the end of my treatment? Because four years ago on that day, I embarked on a journey, and at 18,1 am only getting started.

Holding On

Katarina Nguyen

My mom is petite, no taller that five feet two centimeters tall, but she stands stoically and proudly. She has always been the rock in my family, balancing a life of work as well as taking care of our family. I have always admired her and have seen her as infallible – she has been so strong throughout her life – and now, I hope that she continues to fight, as she always has.

I am now a senior in high school, ready to embark on my next learning journey, but no matter what happens, my mom will be with me, in my heart. The past year and a half has devastated my family and me. During the winter holiday season of my junior year, we learned that my mother has breast cancer. Last summer, we went on a final vacation together before my mother would begin her radiation therapy and be too weak to travel. She visited her homeland, Vietnam, the country from which she escaped, for the first time in 25 years.

When my mom visited her primary school, she broke down and cried. It was the first time I ever saw my mom shed tears, but I recognized what she felt, standing in that empty classroom: the bittersweet nostalgia, the desire for a simpler time, and the fear of the uncertainty that the future holds. As she picked up a piece of chalk and swiped it across the chalkboard lovingly, I saw a woman who has experienced more than a lifetime of hardships, and I knew that my mom deserves so much more than she has now; she deserves the world, she deserves a strong, healthy life.

Throughout senior year, my head was swimming. IB classes, sports, music, volunteer, college applications, and radiation therapy, kept me busy during the day and awake late at night. I silently watched as the daily therapy took a toll on my mom. She quickly became burned by the heat and was in constant pain. I could tell she was trying to hide her pain. I did all I could, bringing cool ice packs, finding her the lightest shirts to wear and helping her in any way I could; but it was not enough. My mom still had cancer, she still had burns, she was still in pain, and we all knew it. My dad has withdrawn, unable to accept the reality of the situation. He and I keep our emotions and pain bottled up. It runs in the family.

During this time, I had a private ritual that was more sacred to me than anything else I could do. In the dead of night, I would silently make my way to my parents' bedroom and sit outside the door. I would listen closely so I could discern my mom's breathing. The slow inhale and exhale, the signal of life, the signal of peace, a few hours without pain. In fact, as I write this, I can hear my mom's breathing now. It is as gentle as she is, a languid inhale, taking in fresh air and a quicker exhale, as if she cannot wait to take her next breath of life.

In the fall, I had set my mind on staying in state to take care of my mom, because I cannot afford to lose her; none of us can. My mom has insisted I follow my dreams though, and I now sit here with several choices for my future; she has always put the interests of others above herself. I have only a few days left to decide and I am torn. But I do know my mom has inspired me to achieve all I can, and I have strived to make her proud. I will work for her, and I hope that

I will be one of the individuals who can contribute to the cure for all cancer. Although I do not know where the future will lead me, I do know that I want to be part of my mom’s cure: she gave me the gift of life, and I desire to do the same for her.

Hang on mom, I’m working for you.

Love Survives

Gabriella Byrne

When I was eight years old, I saw “The Christmas Shoes,” a touching movie about a family’s struggle with cancer, for the first time. Petrified that my mother would die like the boy’s mother in the movie, I crawled, weeping, to her side and confessed my fears. Looking straight into my eyes, she promised she never would leave and hugged me tight. I believed her with all my heart, but sometimes we make promises we cannot keep; this was one such promise.

My mother, Judith Maria Byrne, died from Melanoma Skin Cancer December 8th, 2009 at the young age of forty-eight. However, her battle began two years earlier with a tiny mole. During a routine skin check, dermatologists discovered a cancerous mole sitting in the middle of my mother’s upper back. With a shot of numbing medicine, a quick incision, and a few snips the dangerous mole was removed and she was notified that she had nothing to worry about. Unbeknownst to anyone, however, the cancer lived on and Melanoma cells secretly invaded my mother’s body, transporting themselves throughout her blood stream, latching onto her most vital organs. They waited patiently for a year and a half until my mother derived a persistent cough that forced her to visit the doctor. After taking a CAT scan of her chest and visceral organs, tears leaked from the corners of the doctor’s eyes as she informed my mother that Melanoma cancer cells had metastasized and formed tumors on her lungs, kidneys, and liver. She had stage four Melanoma Skin Cancer-chance of survival: less than twenty percent.

I did not understand the seriousness of the situation when my mother broke the news to me. Sitting quietly on the couch, she pronounced she had cancer and would undergo Interleukin treatment in a couple of weeks. Dumbfounded, I looked into her watering eyes and whispered, “You’re gonna be okay, right? They treat cancer all the time…” Forcing a smile, she wrapped me in her arms saying, “I hope so,” as I bawled into her shoulder. Truth be told, I honestly believed my mother would be fine. As a fifteen year old girl, I was naïve to the world of death and suffering; after all, it was only people in movies who died of cancer, right? I could not have been more wrong.

Entering the University of Washington’s cancer ward, my mother began two weeks of intensive cancer treatment that left her bloated, feverish, and weak. My father forced us to stay home during the worst days of her treatment, but when we were allowed to visit my heart ached for my mother. Swollen and blotchy, she hardly resembled the woman I had known my entire life. I was afraid to touch her; scared any contact would send shocks of pain up and down her beaten body. Seeing her this way made me angry at the cancer, upset with the nurses and doctors for not doing more, and frustrated that everything was out of my control.

Despite this, my true anger and resentment fell on my sister, who aimed all her fury at our helpless mother, lying sickly in her hospital bed. Eighteen months younger than me, Mackenzie towered over my mother. With hot tears rolling down her cheeks and clenched fists shaking at her sides, she blamed my mother for everything that was happening. Her cold words shot an arrow through my heart. Trembling inside, I wanted to drag Mackenzie out of the room and scream at her. I wanted to slap her, shake her by the shoulders, and tell her how utterly wrong she was. Sitting in that hospital room, watching Mackenzie bully my mother, I felt hatred toward my sister for the first time in my life, and let my emotions take hold of me. Later, at home, I screamed at her until I collapsed and we sobbed into each other's shoulders. Vulnerable, desperate, and broken-hearted, we cried until we could not cry anymore.

Soon, after two weeks of agony, my mother and father came home with good news: many of the tumors had reduced in size, and some had completely disappeared. For a treatment with only a ten percent success rate, it seemed to be working. Hopeful, my mother went back for two more weeks of treatment about a month later, and we all held our breath. Surprisingly, more good news came after round two and my mother began to feel better. She returned to work, attended regular Body Pump and Pilate's classes at the gym, and seemed like her old, spirited self again. The Melanoma was not defeated though, and doctors wanted to try a new experimental drug on my mother. Open-minded and ready, my parents arrived in Seattle for their final meeting before the experiment trials, only to learn that my mother's previous scans revealed fluid building up in her lungs. Due to this, she was no longer qualified for the drug, and had new problems on top of the cancer.

Within days of receiving this news, fluid filled my mother's lungs, and it pained her to breath. Barely breathing, she returned to the hospital and doctors immediately installed a catheter in her side where the fluid could drain. Manually, they drained two full liter bottles of red fluid almost daily, reestablishing her airways, and extending her life a little longer. With the fluid situation seemingly under control, the doctors taught my father the procedure, and he graciously returned home with my mother.

Upon their arrival, we greeted an entirely different woman. With a heavy heart, I gazed at her thinning hair, bony limbs, and sunken eyes as she struggled to sit down on the couch. My siblings and I surrounded her and my father quietly announced he had to tell us something. His sad, tired eyes searched our questioning faces as his shoulders sagged under the weight of his news. I knew what he was going to say before the words escaped his chapped lips. "Mom isn't going to live much longer," he choked as my brother and sister erupted in a fountain of tears. Wearily my mother tried to comfort them, but her slow and laborious movements tired her quickly and she whispered she wanted to go to bed.

Supporting her frail frame, my father slowly helped her up the stairs. Ragged breaths escaped her thin chest, and I could almost hear the fluid suffocating her from the inside out. After she was comfortably settled, I crawled gently to my mother's side and laid my head against her bony shoulder. Suddenly, I felt the need to confess all my secrets and update her on my life. In whispered tones, I filled her in on my hopes and dreams, my newest crush, and how much I loved her. As her eyelids fluttered and she drifted off to sleep, I knew there was no going back to how life used to be. This was the last real conversation I had with my mother before she died.

In the days that followed, Hospice arrived at our house and a large hospital bed took residence in the middle of our living room. Next to the bed, moaning oxygen tanks filled hollow silences and drowned out ragged sobs behind closed doors. Extended family began to arrive, preparing meals and offering hugs. One cold, sunny afternoon, my aunt suggested I help feed my mother. Hot soup in one hand, I tentatively balanced on the edge of her bed and blew on the soup to cool it. “Mom, you have to eat,” I said and gently forced the spoon into her mouth. Slowly, she struggled to swallow, and I proceeded to feed her a bit more. Following her fourth bite, she closed her eyes and turned her head away. She was finished. But she could not tell me because she could not speak. Stroking her soft, bony hands, tears dripped down my cheeks. This was not supposed to happen. I should not be feeding my dying mother. But it was happening and I was forced, beyond the lingering hope she would live, to believe it.

December 8th, 2009, our Hospice nurse and social worker arrived to check on us. As we talked around the kitchen table, the nurse appeared and gravely told us it was time. My heart skipped a beat as my stomach dropped. Time? Time for what? Rushing to her bedside, my brother, sister, father, and I watched as she gulped for air, eyes rolling in all directions. As we cried out desperately to her, she shuddered one final time and lay perfectly still, glossy-eyed and gone forever.

Deafening silence filled the room until my brother screamed, “No!” falling across her lifeless body. In a moment of sheer shock and panic, I felt like I was watching my life on TV. Tears rolled down my face and I hiccupped violently, gasping for air. Countless arms engulfed me and pressed me close, but I wanted to be anywhere but there. None of this was right. That hospital bed did not belong in my living room, all these people needed to go home, and my mother should have been alive. But she was not, and never would be again.

A little over two years ago, my mother died from Melanoma Skin Cancer. Ripped apart and broken, my family struggled to stay afloat as we grieved. However, life goes on; and so did we. I believe my mother would be proud of where we stand today, living life to the fullest, but never forgetting to appreciate what we have been given, as it could be taken any day. During her lifetime, one of my mother’s favorite quotes was by Leo Rosten, who stated,

> “The purpose of life is not to be happy-but to matter, to be productive, to be useful, to have it make some difference that you lived at all.”

Though her life ended shortly, I think my mother fulfilled her mission as a woman, a mother, a wife, a lover, a daughter, an aunt, and a friend. A woman of extraordinary faith, she let no moment pass unnoticed and truly made a difference in the lives of all who knew her. She will forever be remembered in the minds and hearts of those who loved her, and will never be forgotten.

My “Go To” Man

Luke DuChesne

Davis Mitchell Carlson was born September 17th, 1994. Davis was the best at everything. Basketball, baseball, soccer, golf, you name it, and Davis was a standout in it. He was my enemy when I first started playing sports. Davis impacted my life in many ways. He started out as my enemy, he then became my teammate and close friend, he then became my brother. Davis Carlson was untouchable, unbreakable, and respected by all who crossed him in any game, match, or round.

I played on the Elger Bay Elementary basketball team. Our rival School was Utsalady Elementary, lead by Kevin Hofstad, Drew Sears, and big man on campus, #23 Davis Carlson. The terrible three did all they could to make my life miserable. All three of them had the nicest gear and never missed a shot. I had my cheap Adidas shoes and a funky looking jump shot. Both years I played them they came out in their red jerseys that I was always so jealous of, my team had plain white and black, nothing special. They beat us every year. I played my heart out and scored the most out of anyone on my team, but Davis always had an answer. He rarely missed, and it drove me crazy. Kevin always taunted me and talked mad trash for a 3rd grader, Drew was super tall and no one could ever stop him down in the post. Davis had the outside shot with beautiful form that always went in. I hated that Utsalady Elementary team, and Davis’ jumper made me sick, and whenever I thought of the terrible three, I had a bad taste in my mouth.

In 4th grade I was asked to join a travel team for the city of Stanwood. I was overjoyed; you had to be a standout player in order to even be asked to tryout for the team. But, there was only one travel team in town. That meant the terrible three were there. I was being forced to play with them. It was strange at first, but we were only ten years old, we were playing well together in no time, and I loved playing with Davis, whenever I passed him the ball, he scored, so my assist average went up. He always made the extra pass to me too, when he was open, but I was one pass away, he would throw it to me. No one ever did that! It was just how Davis worked. He was a team player, he put others before himself, even though he had the most beautiful shot. Our team was flawless in no time; we have Kevin at point guard, me at shooting guard, Davis at Small Forward, and big baby Drew at center. We all played together now, and we grew on each other. I loved those guys and they loved me, Davis became my teammate and more importantly, one of my best friends.

Halfway through the season, news came to our team. Our best player, Davis, had been diagnosed with Leukemia. A disease rarely found in a child. Kevin, Drew, and I visited Davis as soon as we could in the Children’s Hospital in Seattle. The hospital was all bright and happy throughout the hallways, full of colorful paintings and purple and teal hallways. The rooms were white. Davis’ hospital robe was white. He was white. His bed sheets were white. His father’s face was white. No expression. Our parents warned us Davis might cry and be sad when we saw him. We walked in and he was all smiles. I thought my parents were crazy for telling us he was sad, he joked with us, he laughed with us. I thought nothing was wrong. Nothing could hold Davis down. He would be back in no time. Our team began to play for him, we won our games without him and ended the year on a strong note. We went throughout the year constantly visiting Davis and venturing the city of Seattle with him. He became much more then a friend, a brother. Davis had chemotherapy every week. It turned him all white and he didn't move much. I saw the red strips from the machine enter his body slowly through the tube connected to his wrist. I had no clue how sick it made him. I knew it made him bald though. So Kevin, Drew, and I shaved our heads for him, and we started our 5th grade basketball season playing bald for him. Davis would be back playing with us that year, even the doctors said he was progressing.

December 25th, 2005, Davis Mitchell Carlson died in the Children's Hospital in Seattle. He was at a Seahawks game, he told his dad he didn't feel well, so his dad took him back to the hospital, he was laid in bed, and died there that night. My mom told me the news, my stomach shot up to my throat. It stayed there for months. My mind couldn't comprehend that I would never see him again at such a young age. He would be back playing with us in no time. I would be back at his house playing football with him and Kevin and Drew next weekend. I grew my hair back out. I didn't like having hair. The last time I saw Davis, he was in our baseball team uniform, lying in his coffin, still bald. I had the honor of carrying Davis' coffin, with Kevin, Drew, and Davis' dad and a few other relatives. I later learned that Davis was told that he was going to die. He told everyone not to tell Kevin, Drew, and I. I love Davis for that. It defines who he was, selfless. Davis is always with me on the court, my go to man.

"*Michael Jordan and Lebron James aren't the only heroes to wear the Number 23.*"

-Nate DuChesne in Davis Carlson's memorial speech.

My Mother's Struggles

Matthew Mendez

Watching a person go through cancer treatment could easily be considered one of the hardest things for someone to do. Especially when that person is your mother. Cancer is a battle that is often times viewed upon as unbeatable, in my situation cancer was unbeatable.

When I was 3 years old, my mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer, which involves aggressive cells that later turn into cancer within the lining of the cervix. After finding out what was present within her body, she sought out immediate help from an oncologist. After a year and a half of chemotherapy and other treatments she was considered cancer free. This was a big relief to the rest of my family but I was not old enough to understand what was happening to my mother.

My mom went about her regular life, with her routine doctor appointments and checkups. It was only a year later when she was re-diagnosed with cancer. Everything possible within the doctors power was done. It was exactly like the first, except this time nothing worked.

A person is only able to take so much of something before it begins to physically wear them out. As for my mother, this was exactly what was happening. Due to the fact that she was no longer going to get better she decided that she would go about doing things as if she did not have any cancer cells within her. As she continued on with her life as “Normal” for the next year she was gradually starting to slow down. At this time I was old enough to realize what was happening. Unfortunately, due to my mother’s declining health a company called Hospice took over her care. It was basically an in home care system that was there to watch over my mother as she was becoming more ill and unable to walk.

Even though I was a small child, there are still parts that continue to stay vivid within my mind. I remember having conversations with my mother and aunt about me someday becoming a doctor. My mother would say comments like “When you become a doctor, will you take care of me?” I would chuckle and reply back “Your are my mom, why wouldn’t I take care of you!?” It broke my heart knowing that the “Someday” that we spoke of would not be here soon enough. So, I tried my best to make my mother feel more comfortable as she lay in her bed in tremendous pain. I knew that she would often cry, trying not to let us see her in pain. My ultimate goal was to feel more useful with the situation and help my mother. My job would be to change her urine bags after a catheter was placed, take her blood glucose, or grab her pillbox for her. All items of which were not significant but at the time it made me feel like a hero.

As I turned 6 years of age, it was time for me to start kindergarten. September became near and my mother would constantly comment that accompanying me to the first day of kindergarten was not an option. She was going to do it. She was indeed going to be able to get out of bed and attend class with me in her wheelchair. I was asked if I would be embarrassed to go to my first day of school with her in a wheelchair. Thinking back now, I would have wanted nothing more.

I still remember the first day, it was cold and rather foggy. My grandma came to pick me up to attend class with me. I was filled with excitement and nervousness as well, I could see that my mother was happy but upset that she wasn't able to come with me on my big day. My grandma took pictures of me on the front steps before we ventured out. One of which, I still have with me to this day. At school, it was different. I recall seeing kids my age everywhere, all of which had their mothers with them, except for myself. It was a feeling of being left out.

September 28th,1999 was a day that I will never forget as long as I breath. I was woken up to lots of people in my house, the hospice nurses were there and they were not their normal cheery selves. I did not understand what it was that was going on until I was able to see my mother. We all knew that the day was going to come, we had been warned. It was apparent that everyone around me was crying yet trying to be strong at the same time. I was in shock. I did not cry until I was fully able to process it. As we all stood around her for a few minutes, my aunt was quick to try to make us leave the room because she did not want us to see what was going on. My father thought differently. My father was not always around for us at the time but it was important that he was there at this time. He encouraged us to know what was happening to our mother. He asked me if I wanted to go give my mother one last hug and a kiss before it was time. As I slowly walked over, unsure if what I was doing was ok, my aunt did not agree but my father still wanted me to do as I wanted. As I reached my mother's bed, she was pale, unresponsive and was wearing an oxygen mask. I gave her one last kiss and a small hug, it was then that I began to weep. I was immediately taken into the other room where the rest of my close family sat. I was taken over to my cousin who I was closest to at the time because she was the one who had cared for us when the adults were unable to. She sat me in her lap and rocked my back and fourth as we both cried. She told us all that it was going to be okay and we would be taken care of and to try not to worry.

Later, we all come out of the room. My mother was gone. I do not remember asking or even wondering where she was. I only remember the disassembled bed. Her mattress that she had laid on for so many days was sitting up against the wall and the hospice truck outside waiting to take the remainder of her medical items.

Missing school for the next week was something that was vivid to me as well. I remember my class sent me cards and a big bag of gummy bears. All of the cards were simply stating that they were sorry to hear about my mom. They really did make a difference to me at the time. Going back to school was another story. I had a lot of counseling and was told that I had to go. I was brought into a room with a lot of toys that I was allowed to play with as I was asked how I was doing and how things at home were. It felt rather strange for someone to be asking me so many questions, although I didn't really care at the time.

I had a best friend at school that year. Her name was Abby Gomez. She was by far one of the people that made me feel like I was a normal child. We would play on a daily basis and for some reason she had a way of making me feel so happy and young. Overall, the rest of the year I had a lot of adjusting I had to get used to.

Knowing what I do now, I feel like the experience has made me a stronger person. Not only for myself but to be able to help out others in need or others that are going through what I once went through. Today, Abby and myself are still good friends are going into the same field of study. I am going to be attending Washington State University's Pre-Medicine program. I hope to one day fulfill my mothers dream and become a doctor. Although I wont be taking care of her as we once joked, I will be able to care for others and hopefully reunite them with their families. After all, its what she would have wanted.

One

Julia Owen

"How many siblings do you have?"

My worst nightmare; my greatest fear; the moment I hoped would never come, but knew ultimately would. There I was. And there was no way to stop it. *How will I answer? Two? One? Will my facial expression give it away regardless of my response? Does she already know? Can my mom hear me? I'm taking too long to respond. Umm..*

On February 23, 2009 I woke up expecting a normal day in my Freshman Year of High School. But, that day was far from normal and a day I would never forget. My mom came into my room, laid next to me, and uttered thirteen ungodly words which together would change the rest of my life: "Last night your brother was diagnosed with Burkitt's Lymphoma- a type of cancer." Shocked but seeking normalcy, I pleaded to attend school for my morning classes and to later visit my twelve-year-old brother, Sam, at the Seattle Children's Hospital. She granted my wish, told me she loved me, and sent me off to school.

The time I spent at school was consumed by fear-filled thoughts regarding the fate of my best friend and brother, Sam. With every bit of might inside of me I grasped onto each second I spent surrounded by comfort at school, full-knowing that the moment I stepped foot into the white-walled, Purell-reeking, labyrinth-like building I would be welcoming myself to my new home-away-from-home. When I finally mustered up the courage to sacrifice my comfort for my desire to be with my brother, I was driven by a close family friend from school to the hospital. Passing the security guards of the Level 1 Giraffe entrance for the first of what would be countless visits, I admitted my name and photo into the visitor system to get a blue 24-hour "visitor's badge." This was the mark of an eight-month life-changing journey centered on my brother and the third floor oncology unit at Seattle Children's Hospital.

Relying on best friends, the game of basketball, and my teacher's leniency and understanding I was able to push through the remainder of my Freshman year while still helping myself and supporting my brother and family. In June of 2009 Sam was pronounced cancer-free but, sadly, he went into reoccurrence mid-July. He spent every minute of the next two and half months fighting for his life with the help of my loving and supportive parents as well as the incredible Seattle Children's Hospital oncology staff. After a failed bone marrow transplant I looked at the calendar. 09.09.09 would forever be engraved in my memory. An MRI in early October showed that Sam's brain was completed consumed in a tumor—making our job to "keep him comfortable." After doing so for the next few weeks, my brother had passed to the only real comfort that existed; one that existed outside of this world.

One afternoon in the following January I came home after a basketball game to a house full of my mom's friends. I decided to talk to a couple of the women, including a woman named Debbie. After talking for a while she asked, "How many siblings do you have?"

… I'm taking too long to respond. Umm… "One."

The moment I uttered this so seemingly simple three letter word I was overcome with shame and guilt for taking a shortcut to avoid a moment of pain, and I vowed to never do it again. I now know for certain that the correct answer, the only answer, is "two."

Sam: I love you, I am proud to be your sister forever, and I will proudly share your story with any person who asks me how many siblings I have.

Survivor

Katie Skurski

March 3, 1996, a day that my family will never forget. That is the day that my family heard the words “your daughter has cancer” come out of a doctor’s mouth. Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), those are big words for a three year old to understand. At that time all I knew was that I was sick and was going to be spending time in the hospital. Now I know that day did not just change my world forever, but the lives of whomever walked into my life as well.

A hospital is a big scary place for a kid. People dressed in funny clothing coming in and out of a strange room poking, prodding, and asking you questions. Children’s Hospital helps to take away the fear though. The hallways are bright and the faces are warm. They are all family now. My nurse has always been there for my family. If it was two in the morning and my mom had a paranoid question she would answer her phone and talk her through it. She and her husband come over every Christmas for dinner to this day. Children’s makes you feel safe.

I still remember the day that we shaved my head. I remember I was tired of it falling out and so I crept up stirs and was standing in the kitchen pulling out my hair. I remember it was quiet and it was only me up stairs, I kept the lights off as if I couldn’t see it, then no one could. A few minutes later my mom came up stairs and found me. I was embarrassed because my parents had always told me that it was my choice when I want to shave my head. I could have just asked for help but I wanted to by myself. My mom was scared when she saw me and I could see it on her face even though she was trying really hard to hide it. She asked me if I wanted to shave it and I said yes.

That night my daddy sat me on the counter and shaved my head. I was sitting on the right side of the counter right next to the light switch. My parents were smiling and telling me how good it looked but I could tell that it was one of the hardest things they had to do. I could no longer hide that I was sick. Everyone would be able to tell that I was sick. I no longer had the beautiful brown hair. Now my head was just fuzzy. I remember turning around and seeing myself in the mirror I remember wondering if now the kids at school would treat me different.

All the boys in my family shaved their heads in honor of me. Even my younger cousin who had no clue what was going on. My Uncle Jimmy was a football player at the University of Washington and he shaved his head too. That year his picture in the program he had no hair. The kids at pre-school treated me the same. Actually, they thought it was kind of cool. The two boys I carpooled with used to pet my head in the car. Like I said, my head was fuzzy. Losing your hair is not even close to the only thing that changes physically when you have cancer.

A port-a-cath is a metal object that is about half an inch in diameter that the doctors put in your chest. They do this so that you don’t have to constantly get poked for blood draws and IVs. They put it on your chest so that it can feed into and draw blood from, the right place. When it is in you couldn’t see it but you could see the scar. You could defiantly feel it though. I didn’t really like people touching it. I could feel it when they touched it. I didn’t really even like wearing clothes because they would lay on it and it bothered me. The scar on my chest from my port is the only obvious sign of my cancer left for everyone to see.

In elementary school I tried so hard to cover it up. I didn’t really understand at that time that the scar was my badge of honor. A sign for the world to see that I was not to be messed with. My fourth grade teacher had a scare on her hand. I don’t even remember how she got it, but one day I was staying after school and she was working with me on a project. The shirt I was wearing that day was a red t-shirt, the sleeves had some lace on them, and there were some small flowers on the bottom of the shirt. It wasn’t a low cut shirt but it did have a tendency to show my scar. It was the end of a long day and my frustration with my shirt was starting to show. My teacher asked me what was wrong and I told her that my scar was showing and I didn’t like it when people could see it.

She kind of laughed and then got very strong faced and told me that everyone in the world should see my scar and that it should not be a burden, but a blessing. That was really the main point where I started to realize that I needed to be proud of my story.

In Jr. High school I need to advocate more for myself with my teachers and make sure that they knew about my learning disability. For them to understand me they need to know my story. My English teachers suddenly knew my story with any free write. In January of 9th grade my friend’s mom passed away due to cancer and that put the fire under me to go out and find a cure.

Our Jr. High pulled together behind my friend and we started a Relay for Life team. I started to tell my story even louder. I saw the affect that my story had on people. Again I realized that I needed to be an advocate, not just for myself and the side effects that the chemo has left me with, but for other people touched by cancer.

My story and history has helped my friends understand the importance of hope when it comes to dealing with cancer. My friends can now understand that they really can help people.

When I was only a few months into treatment, I did the fashion show with the Gilda’s Club. There was an older girl there named Kristen. She was diagnosed at the same age I was and was now a strong, healthy 12 year old. It helped my mom realize that I could make it through it. It gave my mom hope. Once you have hope you cannot be taken down. Through the ups and downs of treatment it can be hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. With hope the rode seems wider and the end is a little bit easier to see.

I am a cancer survivor. My body, my family, and my friends have all been through a lot. Some days it is hard to see that what happened to me happened for a reason, but when I help people get through one of the hardest times in their life, I know it happened for a reason. I have a scar on my chest that shows the world that nothing can knock me down. Being a cancer survivor is something that no one can take away from me.

Two Things I Like About You

Hannah McIlroy

When I was younger my mom would crawl in bed with me when she was saying good night, and we'd take turns telling each other two things we liked about the other person. I could never come up with anything other than, "You're a great mom," or "You're a great Girl Scout leader." My mom, Deena, was more than that, though. Everyone loved to be around her because she had an enthusiasm that made other people joyful, too. She always knew the right thing to do. She loved to try new things, like bunco and tractor pulls. Looking back now I might say, "I like how you explain your blood charts to me and Katie," or "I like how one time you used your cancer as an excuse not to buy something from a telemarketer."

I never thought to mention anything about my mom's cancer during our bedtime talks because it wasn't a big deal to me. My mom was diagnosed with Stage IV inflammatory breast cancer in April of 2003. Initially, I was terrified. What if she needed surgery, the scariest possibility from my eight-year-old perspective? But one day soon after our parents told me and Katie, I was in the bathroom with my mom while she was relaxing in the bathtub. She asked me if I wanted to feel the cancer. She showed me where it was. The warm water licked the sides of the tub as I touched the hardened spot under her skin. "I feel it," I said. I settled onto the linoleum floor. I asked when her surgery was going to be. To my ingenuous relief, Mom told me that this was a kind of cancer that couldn't be fixed by cutting it out. She would need medicine instead. My burden was lifted, and for the next four years, our parents hid the fact that Mom was actually living exponentially longer than Dr. Carol expected.

Mom never wanted Katie and I to see how tired she was, or let cancer affect the quality of her mothering. We never noticed when my mom was fatigued, nauseous, or maybe a little forgetful. But there were times when my mom's struggle became apparent. One October day, Mom, Katie and I went to the Halloween store to pick out costumes, an event my sister and I had long-awaited since September when the commercials came on. We were finally parked outside the store and my mom reached down for her purse. She sounded so disappointed in herself as she said, "I'm sorry, girls, I left my purse at home." Katie and I cried out in upset. "I'm sorry, girls," she said again, "this chemo has just made me a little forgetful lately." And the three of us cried in our minivan outside the costume store because we hated disappointment and because we hated cancer for bringing it upon us. But other than occasional events like that day, or the dinners brought by friends, my mom's cancer was uneventful for me and Katie.

Life was normal for the McIlroy girls for a while. But sixth grade was bad. I was twelve years old, which should explain everything. Starting a new middle school, puberty and homework were enough for me. And Mom's cancer was getting worse. Her body was either dehydrated and bony, or her feet were swollen with fluid. Because of that, I had not wanted to go on a week-long school camping trip in May to Bowman Bay in the San Juan Islands. I would get to spend the whole week with my friends, hiking, learning and playing. Conflicted because I knew my mom was in bad shape, on Sunday night I cried about how I did not want to go. My mom assured me that she would be fine while I was gone. On Saturday, I finally got some down time after the long week. I came home from a sleepover that I had left the house for shortly after returning home from the camping trip. I had barely picked up my book, when my mom called me downstairs. I sank into the family room couch, my sister next to me, my dad on her other side, and my mom in the rocking chair to my right.

I don't really remember which parent said what, but they told me and my sister that Mom's medicine wasn't working any more. My gut came to the conclusion, but my head tried to push it away.

"But, they have more, right?" I asked, my voice quaking as I tried to sound nonchalant and sure of myself. I would make them say it, even if it was painful, and then I would be able to believe it. I didn't want to assume that she was dying if it maybe wasn't true. My mom had a look of heartbreak on her face.

"No, Honey. They don't." And that was truth enough to send me falling into her arms, my sister into my dad's. Katie had been silent as I was asking questions, typical of our dynamics as sisters, but now we were both sobbing, completely crushed. I literally felt physical pain in my stomach. Even if your mom has cancer, hope keeps you believing that losing her is still nearly impossible. My world had exploded, debris raining down on our devastated family.

I thought of all the people that prayed for her. I felt so cheated by God. My mom said that God has a plan for us that we don't understand right now, just like how Mom and Dad have a plan for me and Katie that doesn't always make us happy at the time. "But we have to trust God that he's doing the right thing." It was hard to accept, so mostly I was just mad at God.

The worst memory I have, of my mom's cancer, of my childhood, is a prolonged haze of the last few weeks of her life. When your mom is dying, you don't remember individual days, you don't remember in what order events happen. It all seems like the longest day of your life where you skipped school to lay in the hospital bed that the hospice brought to your living room and read *Ella Enchanted* to your mom who was attached to an oxygen tank and fed water with a dropper.

There were so many people! We were in the process of re-carpeting the upstairs, and while the carpet guys were hammering away, the other adults in our family were helping Dad repaint the front entryway. While not what one might envision as the typical environment in which one passes away, I now understand that my mom had insisted these tasks be completed and she would not rest until they were done, an irrational bucket list of sorts. In addition to family, many of my mom's friends came over to spend time with my mom and help our family through the end of her life. Our front door was withstanding more traffic than I-405 at rush hour.

One day my Aunt Marci brought my cousins over. She stepped over the threshold and I collapsed into her arms, saying in a quiet voice, "There's too many people here."

"I know, Honey," she said sympathetically, "I'm sorry." And she took me out for Starbucks, a big treat when you're twelve years old. I had an iced passion tea.

As high school friends, PTSA moms, Girl Scout friends, and many family members came to say good bye, my mom was becoming increasingly weak over a span of a few days. She only wore sweat pants and cozy shirts and relaxed on the couch with my dad devotedly by her side. At first, she was forgetful, which then turned to loopiness and we really started to lose her. She was not herself at all. Then, she needed a wheelchair because she was too weak to move around the house by herself. Eventually, they brought the bed and oxygen so that she could pass at home. Pastor Tom from our church came with a can of grape juice and prayed with her and Dad. Her lips were dry and cracked, her hair had not been washed in days, and I dropped water into her slightly open mouth. It was an awful sight for a daughter, but Mom looked more peaceful than she ever had.

The long haze ended when Dad woke me and my sister up after midnight on May 20, 2007 to tell us that Mom had passed and we could come see her if we wanted. I said, “Oh,” and tucked my head back under the covers. After so much going on, for that moment I didn’t care that my mom had died, and I just wanted to sleep. But I soon walked downstairs to my dad, aunts, uncles and grandparents, and softly announced that I wanted to see her. I held her cold hands and kissed them one last time.

For many nights after her death, I would ask my dad to stay in bed with me, crying. The pain was unbelievable. I missed her shining smile, her warm hugs, her presence. My dad gave us a list my mom had written for me and Katie to read:

1. I am not afraid of dying, but of leaving you and Dad.
2. Remember that after I die, or even Dad dies, you will always have each other.
3. If I could, I’d give you a big, squeezy hug right now.

While Katie, Mom and I had talked about these things, it is always a comfort to read that handwritten list if I’m feeling sad.

On May 20th, it will have been five years since my mom died, and nine years that my life has been changed by cancer. When someone you love dies, it is hard to imagine living without them. The pain, unbearable for a long time, somehow lessened a little every day, and life has finally gotten to the point where not having a mom is normal for us. That may sound sad or depressing, but I am so proud of our family for it. It is a feat that I would never want anyone to have to achieve, but when one does, it is amazing. I feel stronger every day and while I am excited for the day I get to see her again, I am savoring the time that I am spending with my family and the moments I see her in myself.

My dad is incredible, too. We could have been stuck with a jerk that ditched when life got hard or scary, but my dad has always been there. On top of running the household, he goes to work every day and ensures that Katie and I have anything we could ever need, including someone to talk to when we’re upset. Believe it or not, dads give excellent advice about boys! But when I need to talk to a woman, my aunts, grandmas, godmother, sister and Girl Scout troop are there. We have a lot of people in our lives that love us and miss Mom, too.

My experience with cancer is unique because Mom and Dad hid the fear from Katie and me. Mom worked very hard to make sure we did not remember her as being sick. I can attest to her success, because my sweetest memories include snorkeling with her in Hawaii and the time she took me out of school on my 11th birthday to get my ears pierced. There were occasions like the Halloween store, but for the most part, Katie and I were never scared or sad until the end.

I had a conversation with my grandma the other day about her daughter. She said, “She was truly an amazing woman. She did exactly what she set out to do.”

“Which was what?” I asked.

“Protect her children.”

Untitled

Jake Sears

I'm Jake Sears. I'm 18 years old and I have practically lived at Seattle Childrens Hospital my whole life.   It all began in 2000. I was a week away from my 7th birthday when I started feeling sick all the time in my classroom. Also, I couldn't walk straight anymore without banging – boom! boom!—into the walls, leaving huge dents. At the hospital I got an MRI right away. They told my Mom the test revealed something called medulla-blastoma. Brain cancer. Later that day, a surgeon, a specialist and a nurse told my Mom and me I would require surgery immediately to remove the golf ball in my head. If you are wondering where my Dad is in all this, he was gone before I was two years old. I've never seen him, besides in photos. No contact. No memories. No child support. No nothing.

At the age of seven, I didn't fully grasp the concept of cancer, so I pretty much floated with the boat. My mom seemed to be in a pretty calm state of mind, telling me "We'll get through this". She was her usual, positive self.

As soon as I began chemotherapy, I started getting nauseous all the time especially during radiation part --the fumes from the radiation machine smelled awful. It also messed up my taste buds totally. I was sick every second. And nothing seemed appetizing. I didn't want to eat. It took a few weeks before I made the great discovery: Peanut Butter! It was the one thing that made the smell, the nausea disappear.

A year later, after constant chemo and radiation, I was technically cured. But my family as a whole was not cured. I can never get away from cancer. It's like a Black Hole. My mother got diagnosed with abdominal cancer in 2002. It was her time for treatment. A few years after that, my big brother, Nicholas was diagnosed with gleo-blastoma, which is also brain cancer. But it was the kind that's "untreatable". Believe it or not, he lived twice as long as the Doctors predicted. He died on February 21, 2008. He was 17.

Today, I am 18 and battling cancer again. This time it's osteosarcoma. Bone cancer. It's a result of all that radiation that cured me in Round One.
Why does cancer flow throughout my veins? And, apparently, everyone in my family? Even the doctors don't know. My mom is adopted and has never known her background at all. Maybe one reason my dad disappeared is he had a secret or two. Or three. People always ask me "Why?" People want to know… even I wanna' know… Is it genetic? We all want to know why. No one likes to be left in the dark.

One way I get through it all is my passion for cooking. It puts me in my own zone, my own world, --and I can truly enjoy life! Six weeks ago, I qualified for a full scholarship to Westlake Culinary School. Maybe when I'm there, I can perfect my very own recipe for peanut butter ice cream pie. It will blow you out of this world.

It doesn’t matter to me WHEN I can start attending. I just want to be clear, and by that I mean “cancer free”. So I stay strong. I don’t give up. I WANT TO COOK.