My Dad died from cancer. That’s my “tag line” when people ask me about him. Those words seem to come more naturally to me than most others, as I have had to say them countless times over the last couple years. They describe everything and nothing of what has happened in my life.

On a chilling day in September, after two years of hair loss, immeasurable pain, and too many rounds of chemotherapy to count, my dad’s battle with cancer ended. A confusing and difficult time in my life began as I tried to navigate through life without a father. Everybody deals with grief differently and my way was to pretend like nothing had happened. I bottled up every emotion that I had and plastered a smile across my face, but deep down I knew that I would never be the same person as I used to be. I constantly revisited the last day I had spent with my dad. I had walked into the hospital room and found him lying on his bed; too weak to even open his eyes. I longingly reached for his hand, but the man on the bed was not the man that I knew—the one who had coached my soccer team and taught me how to walk. I was holding the hand of cancer.

One of the hardest things about losing a parent is feeling that nobody understands. Even worse is feeling different and seeing those differences every day. Nobody understood how father-daughter dances at school made me feel like an outcast and they never saw me cry myself to sleep at night because I knew my dad would never get to see me graduate or walk me down the aisle.

I had never been able to deal with the grief I had felt until one of my best friends lost her mom to cancer last year. I spent long nights with her, reminding her that her mom’s cancer did not define her. Through our long talks and many tears I came to realize something myself: I had been trapped in letting grief define who I was. My grades had fallen, I was no longer happy, and I was not proud of who I was becoming. I knew that I was so much more than losing my dad and I had let my other important qualities fade. I was forced to confront the anger and sadness that had plagued my life for so many years. I finally understood that I had lost my child like innocence and began approaching my life with maturity and a realistic view on the world around me. I spent the next couple months dealing with the immaturities of ignoring my feelings and made a conscious decision to change my life.

At first with bitterness, now with acceptance, I realize that there is no promise of tomorrow. We are given such a small time, and we never know when that will run out.
Helping my friend deal with her loss allowed me to see the world in a new light. The life and death of my dad are strong influences of who I am today, but now I do not let them define me. I am a strong believer that circumstances do not determine who we are; rather our reactions and responses to these situations shape us into the people we become. Due to my dad’s death, I will never be the same. However, I have learned more about myself and who I want to be based on the example of his life. I know that my dad would want me to be happy, and I would much rather honor my father than grieve his loss. He has ultimately inspired me to further my education and use it as a platform in my life to guide me into my future goal of becoming a pediatric oncology nurse. I know my dad is proud of me for pursuing my dreams, and he always remains in my mind, motivating me to reach for the stars.

Katherine Kolendich