

2017 CSCGP High School Teen Essay Contest

The Journey

By Ashley Berdel

There are two types of people in life. Those who stop to smell the roses on their way to work and those who speed passed them on their way to work trampling the roses. Now I do not recollect which one I had been, well, I mean who really does when they are three years old. All I know is the kind of person I am now, thanks to an experience unlike any other. I am now much stronger, more independent and above all more optimistic.

Friday, November 25th 2005 was a day meant to be filled with merriment. My cousin, who was nine at the time, was sleeping over. After a long day of fun when we were starting to sleep, my legs started hurting. It was as if I pulled every muscle and tendon in my legs at the same time. Instead of getting better, it became worse, much worse. The first time I walked out to tell my parents it hurt to walk. The second time I had to walk on my knees because of the pain. By the third time I had to crawl, but it was more me dragging my legs behind me while I used my elbows to propel my body forward. My parents finally gave me tylenol and sent me back to bed. The pain decreased a smidge and I eventually fell asleep. In the morning, I was moving as if last night's pain had never transpired. As a precaution my Mother made a doctors appointment anyway.

However, my mom and I proceeded to the pediatrician and she examined me. After awhile she could guess what it was. She was not permitted to diagnose me without tests from a hospital. She recommended The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and that is precisely where we ended up. By the time they were examining me, at the hospital the pain in my legs had become so excruciating that I could not even stand without falling. When weighing me the doctors had to hold me up by my arms. Various tests and nurses later, a life changing-conclusion had been made. On Wednesday, December 7th 2005, I was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia.

Was it scary? Yes. Absolutely I really learned the true definition of fear throughout my battle. The real reason I was scared was because I did not have a clue what was going on. But, my parents made it their job to make sure I was assured everything would be alright. I had spent every holiday in the hospital at least once, but instead of being upset about it we decided to celebrate there. We did so many things from dying eggs for Easter (and also dying the sink, oops) to opening presents from Santa Claus in the hospital room. Most of you are probably wondering what was it like being bald? Honestly, I recommend it because you save tons of money on shampoo and conditioner. Besides my Mom being told what a handsome son she had, or being asked why her son was wearing a dress, it was great. My hair grew back so much lighter, sadly so did my eyebrows. My eyelashes grew back so much longer and thicker too so it was pretty great that I lost all my hair. I was so little I really didn't care what people thought or said. Now I would have probably been so self conscious about being bald. But, I feel there is

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nothing wrong with being the way I am. This is the way I was meant to be and it is only temporary. Being bald was a small price to pay for my cancer to be beaten. Not all treatment was this simple however.

Treatment was filled with shots, being woken up by nurses, and tons of medicine. The amount of medicine was so tremendous and so frequent that the UPS guy who delivered it knew us by name. When I wasn't taking medicine from Florida, we would get it at the Pharmacy and even they began to know my family. There were more not so fun aspects about the medicine I took. For example the steroids made me have major mood swings. Other medicines would make me constantly throw up. The worst of all was the lumbar punctures, or the removal of spinal fluid. To this day, I remember those the most out of any other part of treatment. I still recall the anticipation of the giant pain filled needle being injected in my spine to numb it and to put me to sleep. I had gotten them done so many times that scar tissue built up in an extreme amount. Therefore, causing me even more discomfort in my back. Drives lasting over 45 minutes were impossible to take because all they would do was cause me pain. Over the years the length of trips became longer and longer as the doctors said they would. They also said I would grow out of it, but some doctors believe I just adjusted to the discomfort/pain. On humid days I am still bothered by the pain but other than that I am just dandy. The whole time all I wanted was for my back to feel better. After all those years of the same pain in the same place (my lower back) I was much more annoyed than in pain.

There are so many issues to this day that are the side effects of cancer or the medicine used to fight it. For example, how many gray hairs my parents have. The experience really scared my parents, I don't blame them. Other side effects include my compromised ability to process things like other people. The medicine slowed down my processing speed so a test that may take some people 5 minutes will take me 15. In school I have to work twice as hard to get the material down as well as others so I can take that test in 5 minutes. There are many challenges but they have made me the person I am today.

From my battle I learned many things. I learned that family is not always blood related. My father's best friend and his wife would visit me at any time they could. They would watch my sister while I was in the hospital. People around my Dad's work, when they found out I was sick, offered up their vacations so he could spend more time with me in the hospital. There were so many people who I had never met that came to visit me. Who came to help out with whatever they could. Family is those who support you during your time in need. Each and everything happens for a reason. Being sick may not have been a good thing, but, it taught me that no matter how hard things seem I can always get past them. I learned that the scariest things in life can be faced. Finally, I learned how important it is to live life to the fullest and to always take the time to stop and smell the roses.