

## **Mark D’Introno**

Cancer. It is a word that I never paid attention to. Sure, there was an uneasiness I would experience whenever the “C” word was mentioned, but I never gave it a second thought. Cancer was something that other people got. In my world, it only affected those that were over the age of sixty, had smoked for most of their lives, or were in poor physical shape. Being eighteen, having never smoked a day in my life and being in pretty good shape, cancer was the least of my concerns. I had my whole life to look forward to. I would be starting college soon – a whole new world of experiences. I did not need to bother myself with worrying about things like chemotherapy or radiation. Looking back now, I realize how naïve and childish I was. My world and my view of cancer were soon going to drastically change.

My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer at the end of my senior year of high school. It came as a complete and total shock to my family, my mom and myself. She had gone in for a routine mammography and came out with a treatment plan for cancer. She had to undergo five doses of chemotherapy, immediately followed by two months of radiation. Being the matriarch of a family of six, my brothers, sisters and I wondered what was going to happen. Cancer had never affected us before and we did not know how to act. We were all scared. The only one who had a strong head on their shoulders throughout the whole ordeal was my mother. She was determined to fight. Always the optimist, she would constantly remind me that cancer was just something she “had to go through” – something that she would eventually conquer.

As I watched her progress into her treatments, I was inspired at how strong she was. I wondered if I would ever have the strength to get through what she was going through. The chemo, the nausea, the blood tests and all the doctors’ visits looked to stressful for someone to handle. She however, made it look easy.

Nine months after my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, I found out the answer to that question regarding my own strength. With my mom still undergoing radiation, I was diagnosed with Ewing’s Sarcoma – a very rare form of bone cancer. I would have to undergo forty-eight weeks of chemotherapy, as well as surgery if I wanted to kill the tumor and prevent it from spreading. Taking the same approach as my mother did, I repeatedly told myself that cancer was just something I “had to go through” –

something that I would eventually conquer. I tried not to get angry or question why me, as most cancer patients do. Instead I prepared myself for the fight of my life and was determined to battle anything the doctor's threw at me.

As my treatments progressed and my hair began to fall out, I started to think about whom I was and the world that was around me. Before my encounter with cancer, I had always been fascinated with money. Like anyone else, I dreamed I would be working at a high paying job, would have four cars parked in the garage and be wearing the most expensive clothes. To me, success meant a higher tax bracket and how much money was in your pocket. It never occurred to me, that money does not equate happiness. Once my mortality was questioned, however, I came to the conclusion that no amount of money was worth your health. Yes, money could buy you nice things, but it could not buy you life and it certainly did not guarantee happiness. In our society we are suffocated by an infatuation with the almighty dollar that we often fail to realize that money is not the most important thing to life. It took cancer for me to realize that your happiness and your health is.

Being in the children's oncology ward at Schneider's Long Island Jewish Hospital, I came in contact with numerous children who were undergoing the same battle with cancer that I was. Even though they were terminally ill, each one of those children possessed an aura of life. They were not concerned about their platelet count or the long time side effects of chemo. Rather their world revolved around Barney or playing with toy trucks. As I watched the passion and innocence for life in the eyes of each one of these children, I came to the realization that people often fail to appreciate just how precious life is. We get so caught up with work or family drama that we often take life for granted. I know I did. Before cancer, instead of praising God and being thankful that I was alive, I would find something to complain about. If it wasn't school or friends, there was always something that was giving me trouble. There was always something that I could find to complain about. After seeing countless children going in and out of that hospital, some going home and some not, however, I now thank God everyday for letting me wake up in the morning and being able to live. Cancer had made me a better person. It has installed within me a greater respect for my own life and the lives of those

around me. Instead of complaining about things, I try and remember how fortunate I am that I can complain.

As I look towards the future, I plan on making something out of my life. I want to be successful. The no longer means having four cars – but rather being happy and healthy. I am currently attending New York University with a major in Economics. Although I am not sure as to what career path I will choose, I know that I will exhibit the same determinism to succeed as I did with cancer. Even though it is gone, cancer is still part of my life. That is why I know that somewhere down the road I want to get involved in a non-profit organization that helps cancer patients, especially children. I not only want to succeed but I want to help and become involved. I am now a stronger person with a greater respect for life and I want to share that with the rest of the world. Although it may sound weird, cancer is the best thing that could have happened to me.