



**Amelia Fay-Berquist  
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Winner – 2007 Matt Stauffer Scholarship  
Essay**

***Our founder, Doug Ulman, often says that cancer is the best and worst thing that ever happened to him. What do you think when you read that statement?***

In August 2005, I set out from my home state of California to New Jersey to finish my undergraduate education at Rutgers University. The move was a challenge for me to branch out, expand my horizons, and step out of my comfort zone for a new experience. I went to a place far from family, friends, and familiarity. When I arrived, I knew no one, but with time found myself becoming rooted within my new community. I began working as a medical interpreter and patient advocate — a job I was impassioned with from day one. I made close connections to my teachers, deans, and student organizations, and as a result, was presented with further opportunities to work within my community both on campus and off; one step closer to becoming a human rights lawyer.

In the last 2 weeks of my 2<sup>nd</sup> successful semester at Rutgers, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Not only was I diagnosed with cancer, but I was presented with a new challenge: having no health insurance. I had been working in clinics, advocating for those without health insurance for the last year, and now it was my turn to advocate for myself. My mother joined me in New Jersey., and together we started researching, making inquiries, and searching for information about treatment facilities and potential healthcare coverage before coming back to California. At the same time, I was battling the challenges of facing my mortality, containing my fear, and feelings of isolation and uncertainty. Upon arriving home, I exhausted my savings obtaining 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> opinions before beginning treatment at a clinic in San Francisco serving those with limited and no healthcare. I went through 6 tumultuous months of chemotherapy and radiation, as well as a journey of self-discovery and new relationships.

Growing up in a poor, single-parent home, my mother hustled to make ends meet, and did so compellingly. Amid the struggles that accompany being the sole provider to 3 children, she managed to finish college, graduating with honors. The lessons I took from seeing my mother struggle were to acknowledge one's obstacles and find the resources to ameliorate the situation — fast — because life keeps moving, and one must keep up in order to survive. However, when I was diagnosed with cancer, I was forced to reanalyze my entire approach to life, a philosophy that had provided me with the ability to attain the necessary means to pursue my passions. I had to slow down, stop looking into the future, and concentrate on each day as it presented itself. My body was unpredictable, suffering multiple side effects from the medicines administered to kill my cancer. In order to overcome these challenges, I had to open myself up to the love that was and always had been available to me. My relationships flourished with my family, I sought out survivors, and my friends rallied around me. I thrived and continue to thrive from the strength, love, and commitment they have provided.

Treatment successfully ended in October and I have now entered this new phase in my life called "survivorship." The physical suffering I experienced during treatment was grueling, and my new outlook on day-to-day existence has altered itself completely. The good days are not just good, they're *perfect*. As I wrote in my journal soon after treatment ended, "...wow — I have a little spark inside and want to scream!" I have craved the social hecticness I once complained about, and wait in anticipation to resume my studies and become — once again — involved in the community. However, the speed with which I wish to resume my "normal" life is not possible in this

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new body of mine. My immune system is still recovering and when I have a cold, a body ache, a twitch, the thought of a possible reoccurrence overwhelms my imagination. Working through the fear has been a huge task, and at times the frustrations I feel as a result cause me to look at this experience as nothing but a painful, fruitless tribulation.

Cancer has been a paradox in my life: it turned my world upside down, humbled me, brought me closer to the human condition, and turned my world around once again to face the beauty of life and all its idiosyncrasies. And while cancer has not defined my life, it has drastically refined my perspective of the world and the role we as individuals play in it. Having faced this personal challenge has only strengthened my convictions that we are all global citizens and as such it is imperative to immerse one's self in the struggle to promote justice and healing for ourselves and our neighbors.