



**Katie Hilleke**  
**Asheville, North Carolina**  
**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?*

**Colon Cancer, the best and worst thing that ever happened to me.**

Cancer completely upset my life when I was diagnosed. There has been no other moment which so profoundly stopped me in my tracks and forced me to choose another path. Not only was it a huge shock to be diagnosed with stage 3c colon cancer at 26, but along with the diagnosis came the news that all the plans I had made for the next year, or more, of my life were completely undone and I had to make new ones. This would be difficult for anyone, but I took that part especially hard. I had planned to travel and kayak throughout Central America for the summer, and then teach Spanish at World Class Academy, an outdoor (kayaking) high school, that was traveling from Canada to Mexico during the next semester. For the next six months, I underwent chemotherapy treatments and watched the bills roll in from the hospital. Luckily, I had health insurance, but even so the cost was enormous. I couldn't work because the job I had planned to take in the fall required me to be traveling with the school throughout the semester. I needed to stay in Birmingham and finish my treatments. It was impossible to find a new job at that point because I was so sick every other week and so unsure of when I would need to be off work to receive treatments or go to the doctors office. I moved back in with my parents, who cared for me throughout all the difficult side effects that came along with the chemotherapy drugs.

My lowest point came when I tore my meniscus in my knee and had to undergo another surgery to fix that four days before I had to go back to my fourth chemotherapy treatment. During the sickness that occurred the next three days after my treatment, I felt like I had all I could take and couldn't see myself facing another eight treatments. I prayed hard for more strength and the courage to keep going through the treatments, I just didn't think I could do it alone. What I didn't realize yet was that I was far from alone. The strength and courage came from my friends all around me and all across the country. It was around that time that letters and donations began to pour in from all parts of the United States. Most of the people who contributed were kayakers or cancer survivors. The letters talked of courage and reminded me that I had the strength to face great challenges. The courage and determination that it took for me to walk back into the treatment room less than two weeks later came from these letters.

Now that I am cancer free and, in my mind, healthier than ever before, I wish to give back. I want to inspire others who are facing what I just faced down and show them that we all have the power to face great challenges. One way I can do that is to continue my education. Getting my Masters degree has been a dream for me for years, but it took cancer to stop me and help me to realize that now is the time. I realized by facing cancer that you only live once; you only have one chance to follow your heart and fulfill your dreams. You have to make the absolute most out of your life today, because that is all we have. After I receive my degree, I hope to teach English abroad for a year in Europe and study Spanish and Italian while I am there. I am going to continue to fulfill my hopes and dreams as I go, and I know a Masters in Teaching English as a Second Language will help me to work in the field that I love.

Another way I am giving back is by organizing a kayaking/fundraising trip for the summer to benefit the Lance Armstrong Foundation, and also First Descents (a kayaking camp for young adults living with cancer). I will be kayaking rivers throughout the country to raise money for these

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organizations and also to celebrate the gift of life after facing down cancer. It seems like the best way to celebrate. I will also be spending a camp session with First Descents, meeting other cancer survivors my age. I want an opportunity to meet, encourage, and be inspired by other "cancer brothers and sisters" who are beating down this illness. Because surely, gracefully, gathering strength as we go, we will all rise together. And emerge stronger, more beautiful, and more empowered than ever before. This is the gift cancer has brought to me, a new outlook on life and a new attitude. I am much more thankful for all the good in this world, and much more aware of the beauty in life. This year has been the hardest year of my life, but also the best year of my life.