



Nicolette Balkin
Elmwood Park, Illinois
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?

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. These immortal literary words describe what it feels like to be diagnosed with cancer. I began my struggle to become a psychologist in 2003. I always wanted to help people, but never could find where I fit. Psychology seemed to fit me and what I believed in. I enjoyed helping people face their fears, understand their behaviors, and focus on a brighter future. At that same time, I began volunteering with a summer camp that helped kids that have been diagnosed with cancer. I fell in love with these kids. I was amazed by their strength and their desire to fill their lives with all things positive. They were an inspiration to all those around them. From that moment on I decided that as a psychologist, I would work with pediatric cancer patients. I would help them to understand their diagnosis, face their fears, and focus on that brighter future that begins right as chemotherapy ends. But as I stopped to think about what I could offer my patients, I realized that I had no idea what it felt like to go through cancer. How could I ever relate to these unbelievably strong individuals?

On June 1, 2006, I sat in a doctor's office and was told that I had stage 3 Hodgkin's Lymphoma. After being misdiagnosed for approximately 5 months, I was faced with the reality of surgeries, chemotherapy, and constant doctor visits. I was in shock. This was not something that happened to 24 year old doctoral students finishing up their degrees. I didn't have time for chemotherapy when I had a dissertation to write and classes to pass. I was just about to start an intense practicum that would require large amounts of time and energy. Cancer was just not part of my life itinerary. This was the worst thing that could happen to me, or so I thought.

Cancer is one of those words that bring fear into people's hearts. Everyone knows someone who has had it and no one wants to be told they have it. I have found, however, that cancer is not just a curse, but also a blessing. As I began my treatment, I realized how few resources are available for young adults with cancer. I learned how few clinicians realize that the concerns facing young adult survivors are very different from those of young children and older adults. I learned that as a young adult cancer survivor, I was a minority.

From that moment on I realized what I truly wanted to do with my life. Cancer patients always interested me, but I was in awe of the young adult survivors. I decided that the most important thing I could do was make people aware of the concerns and fears that face young adult cancer patients. The only way I knew that I could do that was in my own words and with that I changed my dissertation topic to focus on young adult survivors of Hodgkin's lymphoma. I am currently working on my dissertation and with every word that I type I feel the strength of every one of the other survivor's who have gone through what I have. With every word I feel their support and encouragement and their gratitude for telling their story and for helping other health professionals to put themselves in our shoes.

Doug Ulman's statement is true. Cancer was the worst thing that ever happened to me. It brought large amounts of pain, fatigue, and frustration. It continues to evoke fear on a daily basis and the bodily scars are a constant reminder. However, cancer was also the best thing that ever happened to me. I met amazing people who took the time to listen to me and hold my hand while I cried. I became aware of my own strength and ability to continue on in the face of adversity. And most important, I realized that I have more life to live and more things that I want to accomplish. I

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have always wanted to help people, but now I have been in their shoes and can relate to the fears and joys that cancer brings. I know how it feels to be invisible and the day I was diagnosed I made a vow to never let any of my future patients feel invisible.

Having cancer has not stopped me from living. It has not stopped me from loving or from believing. It has not caused me to lose faith or hope. But it has made me see who I truly am. I am a survivor and I am proud of being a survivor. And each day I wake up and realize that I have another day to help someone else be proud of themselves as well.