



**AKIVA ZABLOCKI**  
MATT STAUFFER MEMORIAL AWARD RECIPIENT

*Essay Question: "Create a message of hope - in the form of an essay, poem or short story - to a young adult with cancer or impacted by cancer through a parent's diagnosis or death."*

Life is not like a children's story, but we can learn a lot about dealing with the unknown from children. When confronted with a hopeless situation and there seems to be no answer about where you are going, sometimes you need to just leap into that rabbit hole and have faith that you will come out in Wonderland. Four months ago I followed Alice into the rabbit hole.

I was heading towards my senior year at Columbia University. I had just been elected to be Senior Class President, was selected by the Economics department to work as a teacher's assistant, and was chosen to serve as an orientation leader. I could not wait until the summer was over and I started school again. It was going to be a great year.

Then I stumbled across the rabbit hole.

I was diagnosed with a brain tumor—in the brainstem—and I was told that nothing could be done for it. At once my world and my dreams for an amazing future came crashing down. Over the summer I had seen every top neurosurgeon and neurologist at every hospital in New York. Dozens of doctors, all with different opinions, agreed on one thing: it was too risky to operate on me. Then I spotted a white rabbit.

I sent my scans to Dr. Robert Spetzler of Phoenix, Arizona and he immediately told me he would operate. The New York doctors told me in unison, "Don't go to Spetzler!" He is a cowboy, they said. He takes risks that are too dangerous. But these doctors had not read Alice in Wonderland, and had forgotten about what it means to have faith.

When confronted with what seems like a terminal illness like cancer or a brain tumor, doctors can tell you a lot of things. But nothing they say should ever strip you of your faith. There is no correct answer, there is no one solution. Doctors are tools in our hands and we need to find the right one that fits. No matter what they say, there are always options. When they tell you there are no other ways, then you go find the white rabbit to lead you to the hidden path.

I leaped into the rabbit hole, not once thinking how I would get out again, but believing with all my heart that Wonderland was on the other side. And I am still here. Dr. Spetzler removed the whole tumor. After four months of rehabilitation, I can once again walk, run, jump, and hop like a rabbit. I wear an eye patch, but that just helps me be part of my own children's story. I am back at Columbia and I am still Senior Class President. I have not let my illness overcome me, and with my faith, I am climbing out of this hole towards the life I had. We should always believe it possible to find a Wonderland of our own.