

Finding Moments of Joy on the Pediatric Cancer Floor

I have no memories of life without cancer. Actually, my earliest memory is looking up at artificial lights in a harshly lit room. Later I understood that this was a hospital operating room. This operating room was one that I visited every three weeks for many years.

At seventeen months, I was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, a rare type of eye cancer. My doctors discovered 12 small tumors in my right eye and, more concerning, one large tumor that almost completely filled my left eye, and was making its way to my brain. With this diagnosis came countless treatments over the course of many years. Treatments that destroyed my teeth, burned my skin, made me throw up and lose my hair, and caused my left eye to be removed. Treatments that ultimately saved my life and profoundly changed me, in terms of how I navigate through life and what I want to do with my life.

In fact, due to the experience of having such an intimate view of the inner workings of a children's hospital and having received a diverse range of treatments even up until now, I have grown a surprising yet persistent fascination for the world of medicine. I can only attribute this fascination to the wonderful people who cared for me during my formative years. My experiences of countless surgeries, chemotherapy sessions, MRIs, hospital stays, blood tests, cryotherapy, anesthesia, and platelet transfusions were somehow made manageable due to the team of doctors and nurses who cared for me and ultimately saved my life.

Remarkably, the overall feeling that I had during my experience with childhood cancer was one of care and many moments of happiness, despite all of the physical, mental, and emotional turmoil that inevitably comes with cancer treatment. This has drastically affected my perspective on life, particularly how I view people and our ability to care for one another. My experience was one of constantly receiving

kindness and help from people who were doing much more than just the required duties of their job. Despite being in the very unlucky category of being a child who was diagnosed with cancer and despite spending my childhood years in a potentially trauma-inducing place, my medical team did all they could to make the best of my situation. And this has had a huge impact on me and how I see the invaluable impact good, kind, and caring people can make in other people's lives.

My medical team not only gave me the most deliberate and conscientious medical care that they could provide, but also provided seemingly insignificant, but very memorable moments like wagon rides where I felt like the queen of the hospital, popsicles and rice krispie treats after surgeries, and stickers for every procedure to put in my special sticker book (that I still have because those stickers are like badges of bravery to me!). There was a magical toy room that I could visit if I got tired of my hospital room and special art days where I could go and dabble with interesting art supplies. Even now, hospitals, for me, are magical and hallowed places, because of the people working there. And this is exactly the type of person I want to be and where I want to spend my time.

I can say with conviction that as a childhood cancer survivor, my future goals have been completely influenced by the many personal encounters that I have had during my experience as a cancer patient. Following high school, I will attend a 4-year university, where I will pursue a Bachelor's degree in the Honors Program, in either Public Health or Human Biology. Subsequently, I plan to attend medical school where I hope to do my residency and fellowship in Pediatric Oncology and Hematology, allowing me to inspire and serve children who are in the same situation I was once in. I want to help children dealing with a cancer diagnosis to experience the care, support, hope, and healing that I did, and show them, from experience, that it is possible to balance the many challenges of cancer treatments with moments of joy and celebration.