

Finding My “Superheroes”

If you asked 14-year-old me what the most challenging adversity I have faced is, I would have struggled to answer. I might have said the time I broke my foot in 5th grade, but as I reflect now as an 18-year-old, it is shocking to think how one’s life can be flipped drastically upside down in one year.

May 27th, 2019, a day that should have been filled with birthday festivities, is the day that sticks with me. Standing on the cobblestone driveway of my grandparents’ house, I remember the willpower it took not to cry. My aunt, hugging my mom, tears streaming down both of their faces, so unsure and scared of what was to come, saying goodbye and not knowing if things would ever be the same for her sister, my mom.

I remember the family meeting my mom held just two days before. Months of neck pain had prompted an MRI. This showed tumors in my mom’s chest and a high likelihood of cancer. The shock and surreality of it all hit me. My mom had always been the caretaker, and suddenly, overnight, the roles had reversed. All the structure and security I had in my life seemed to vanish. With time, we learned it was an aggressive, advanced cancer called Primary Mediastinal B-Cell Lymphoma. Treatment started fast, in the blink of an eye, looking back on it. Chemotherapy began to take its toll on my family. Everyone in my family coped in different ways. My mom was a fighter and her resiliency and positivity continued to shine through. My mom turned toward the people who had always given her a sense of calm, her friends. Staying the night with her in the hospital for the 32 days she was there over four months or going for a walk with her, her friends were there for her.

Looking back, this was something I envied. It might sound strange to envy a cancer patient, but I was envious of the deep friendships. My mom had her friends every step of the way. I realized that I did not have a person to talk to about the fears and uncertainties. Sure, I had friends, but none I felt comfortable enough sharing such a vulnerable experience. I started to wonder if these people I had chosen to spend my time with would have my back. I wondered what it would take to schedule plans to hang out with me first.

During this lowest time in my life, I began to realize the good I had. I had my family. I had my grandparents, who dropped their entire lives and lived in our bonus room. They selflessly helped with housework, transported my sister and me to school and our many activities, and countless other things. I had my dad, who took on being the sole income provider and made dinner every night. He often would cook 2 different meals depending on my mom’s varying and unreliable taste buds (one of the many side effects of chemo). I had my aunt, who, despite her busy schedule, made time to fly to us

multiple times and help. These family members became my superheroes. I could see how my mom's cancer impacted them and the fear and terror they held for the future, but they also gave me hope. As they carried me through this adversity, I realized the importance of family. I felt pride for these people who could get me through any difficulty. Everyone's support system is different when going through uncharted times. While my mom found her "superheroes" in her friends, I found my superheroes in my family and recognized that my "friends" could remain just "friends."

From this experience, I realized what "superheroes" I could count on as I embarked on the next chapter of my life. My mom's cancer story was scary, but it evoked a passion in me. My mom was extremely lucky because of advancements in chemotherapy for her type of cancer, which had been among the most deadly, to a higher cure rate. The medication, Rituximab, was discovered in 1997 by Dr. Levy.

Choosing a college major had been daunting, but with Dr. Levy and my mom's influence, I discovered the capabilities that Biomedical Engineering held. I will have the direct opportunity to improve the lives of cancer patients. I want to unveil other Rituximab-type heroic medications. I will strive to be a change-maker in the oncology field like Dr. Levy and other cancer-fighting pioneers.