



2019 First Place - Significant Challenge Essay

Essay Part A: Briefly describe a significant challenge you have faced in your life

On May 6, 2011, when I was 10 years old, I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. That day was scariest day of my life. Shortly after, we found out that I would have to undergo a bone marrow transplant because the chemotherapy alone would not be enough to kill my cancer. There were multiple points in my journey where we did not know if I would be able to make it. I had setback after setback - from the rare gene mutation that made me chemo resistant to a rare allergic reaction that not only caused temporary blindness, but also caused the temporary loss of all cognitive ability - so much so that I did not even know who my own mom was. Even though I knew that secondary cancers were likely because of the intense radiation I had received, I was still shocked when I heard the words "you have cancer" for the second time. It was my junior year of high school and I had thought cancer was just a thing of my past. I was preparing to take the ACT and applying for colleges - not worrying about cancer. At that yearly checkup, when my doctor wanted me to have a new test done, I knew something was not right. When the test came back, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. That school semester got cut short so that I could have surgery and radiation, and I went back to school the next.

Essay Part B: Describe how you overcame this challenge. Tell us how it has shaped you as an individual.

When I was ten and first diagnosed with cancer, I was very scared and did not know if I was going to survive. During my journey, something changed and I knew that if I survived I wanted to make an impact on the world around me. I lost so many of my friends from cancer and I am now living in their honor. It is my personal mission to give back to the hospital that saved my life and to help families who are going through that same horrible journey of cancer. In 2012, I started an annual drive to gather gift cards, gas cards, toys, and money for the hematology/oncology patients and their families who are being treated at my local



hospital. Each year, starting around my birthday month and in lieu of birthday gifts, I organize and market for the fundraiser, collect the donations and deliver them. I also spend my time volunteering at the hospital twice a week as a teen volunteer. As a volunteer, I am able to spend time playing with patients who are used to people coming in their rooms to poke them with needles or to talk to their parents. This helps the children feel more comfortable and even enjoy being at the hospital. I also help with a program at the hospital which gets oncology patients up and moving as a part of their healing process. Each week I do fun exercises with them such as dancing, hula-hooping, walking laps, and playing soccer in the hallways. To date, I have volunteered over 320 hours and raised over \$15,000 in gift cards and toys. I have learned so much from being on the other side of cancer but it is about so much more than me. I see these kids who are missing their elementary school field trips and these teenagers who are missing out on their high school experiences because they have this torturous disease that is trying its hardest to kill them. This constantly reminds me why I volunteer and what my purpose is. Every time I volunteer, I am reminded to be grateful for this life that I am able to live. When I talk with parents, just seeing how their faces fill with hope when they learn that I was once in the same position that their children are in is truly amazing. For me, it is not about the hours of volunteering, it is about the impact that I am able to make on others. Volunteering at the hospital confirms what I believe my true purpose in life is. I want to become a pediatric oncology nurse so that I can make a difference in other patients' lives just like my nurses did for mine. My nurses were some of my best friends during my treatment. They did so much more than for me than just check my temperature and give me my medicine. They played games with me in the middle of the night when I could not sleep, sat with me when my mom desperately needed a nap, and instead of getting upset when I sprayed them with water-filled syringes, they had water fights with me in the hallways. I am so excited to attend nursing school so that I can learn all about the treatments that I once had. I am looking forward to being able to hear and guide patients through some of the same fears that I once had. I want to give kids and their families a little glimpse of hope that this diagnosis is not a death sentence.

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