

One minute I was sitting in my living room, watching Curious George with my brother, and the next I was lying in a hospital bed being told that there was a 50% chance I wouldn't live to see my next birthday. In November of 2017, at 10 years old, I was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. I had just started grade five, was doing competitive figure skating, and even got a puppy the week before. Suddenly, everything in my life came to a halt. Friends turned into nurses, and figure skating turned into walks to the operating room. The world moved on while mine paused.

I received four months of chemotherapy which left me with numerous painful side effects. Nausea that controlled my day-to-day routine, bone and joint pain that would make me lose hours and hours of sleep, and countless mouth sores that made even swallowing excruciating. About halfway through treatment, I developed a fungal infection in my liver and lungs and had to be on IV antibiotics for over 7 months. The worst part was that I ended up having to spend Christmas in the hospital. For a 10-year-old who has already had so much taken away, losing Christmas too felt like the end of the world.

While I was the one receiving treatment, cancer affected my entire family. My younger brother, who was only seven at the time, struggled to understand why I had suddenly disappeared. With one parent always by my side, the house became quieter, and my absence was constant. My parents carried the weight of everything, including fear, uncertainty, and exhaustion, while still trying to keep life as normal as possible for both of us. Looking back, I understand that although I was fighting physically, they were fighting in a different way, holding everything together.

After my first round of chemotherapy, things were looking promising. It seemed like the cancer was almost gone, and the remaining treatments were just precautionary. For the first time, there was hope. But after my second round, we learned the leukemia had spread. Chemotherapy alone was not enough, and I would need a bone marrow transplant to survive.

My younger brother ended up being a perfect match. In March 2018, I received a successful bone marrow transplant, something that not only saved my life, but permanently changed my perspective on the people around me. In March 2023, I was officially declared cancer-free.

Even now, cancer continues to shape my life in ways that are not always visible. When I returned to school, I struggled to keep up both academically and socially. After missing months of school, I had to relearn material on my own while also managing ongoing appointments and health concerns. In skating, I returned to a version of myself that felt unfamiliar, physically weaker and behind my peers who had continued progressing. I felt out of place, and at times, embarrassed.

But over time, my mindset shifted. I realized that although cancer had taken a lot from me, it had also changed the way I approach challenges. I became more disciplined, more determined, and more aware of how much effort it takes to rebuild something you once had. I worked hard to catch up, not just to prove something to others, but to prove to myself that I was still capable.

Childhood cancer did not just interrupt my life, it changed how I experience it. I do not take normal moments for granted in the same way anymore. Things like being able to go to school consistently, participate in sports, or spend time with my family carry a different kind of meaning. At the same time, it has made me more aware of how quickly things can change, and how important support systems are during those moments.

OPACC has been a significant part of that support system for my family. During my treatment, my parents attended parent drop-in sessions, where they were able to connect with others going through similar experiences. Having that community made an incredibly difficult time feel less isolating, and I truly believe it helped them stay strong for my brother and I.

After treatment, OPACC continued to support us in a different way. Through events and experiences, they gave my family the chance to reconnect and rebuild after everything we had been through. Whether it was attending a play with my mom or a basketball game with my dad and brother, those moments allowed us to feel like a normal family again. That sense of normalcy is something that is often overlooked, but after cancer, it means everything.

Looking forward, I plan to continue working toward my degree in kinesiology, with the goal of becoming either a physiotherapist or a teacher. My experience recovering from cancer has given me a strong appreciation for movement, rehabilitation, and overall well-being. I understand firsthand how challenging it can be to rebuild strength and confidence, and I want to be able to support others through that process.

In addition to my career goals, I am committed to continuing my advocacy work. As a patient ambassador for SickKids Hospital and the Make-A-Wish Foundation, I have seen how impactful it can be to share my story. Moving forward, I hope to continue raising awareness and supporting others who are going through similar experiences.

The OPACC Survivor Scholarship would help me take the next step toward these goals by easing the financial burden of post-secondary education. It would allow me to focus more on my studies and become involved in my school community, something I value deeply after missing out on parts of my childhood.

More than that, this scholarship represents something bigger to me. It is a reminder that although cancer has been a defining part of my life, it does not limit what I can do moving forward. Instead, it has shaped the person I am becoming, someone who is resilient, motivated, and committed to helping others.

While cancer changed the course of my life, it also gave me a perspective I carry with me every day. As I move into the next chapter, I am not only focused on my own success, but on using what I have been through to support others. I cannot change what happened to me, but I can decide what comes next, and I choose to make it meaningful.