

## A Creative's Dilemma: The Unappreciated Value of Art

Since I was in high school, even before the cancer, I'd been an anxious person—I wanted to be an illustrator but doubted whether it was a viable career as an adult. Growing up in Markham, a community of mostly Asian-Canadians; many of our parents hadn't grown up well off and had to work tirelessly for a comfortable life. Many adults instill a fear into their kids to work hard and get a cliché well-paying job like a doctor, or lawyer; telling most parents you were going to enter the arts would get you laughed out of a room. It was a frivolous endeavour that made no money, so it had no value. My parents were unusual; they were supportive, believed I could be successful, and wouldn't let me drop out of my high school's art program, even when I was a sobbing mess. It didn't matter if they thought I could do it, everyone else in my community said otherwise, and I didn't find myself lucky. Yet in senior year, without the skill set to do anything else, I decided to pursue art post-secondary.

That winter was one of the most stressful times of my life, hunched over my paper-ridden desk with a pencil in hand; I had worked on my art school portfolios for months and couldn't stop. Submissions were two months away, and I, smart as I was, decided to apply to three art institutions—OCAD, Sheridan, and Seneca—the kicker being two required *a lot* of new work. Without the guidance of a teacher, and burning out on motivation, I somehow managed to get it all done by deadlines—and by March, I got two acceptance letters back. I was accepted into OCAD Illustration early after a portfolio review, and shockingly accepted into Sheridan Illustration later, scraping by with 61%. Even with the main stress over, anxiety would still creep

up on me. Since I was six, I loved creating art, but my years in school burnt me out and with knowledge that art was a notoriously difficult industry to break into, I didn't know which or whether to choose at all. For the past four years, I had been on autopilot, working towards something I wasn't sure would be worth it. I didn't have any friends at my school, everyone I knew went somewhere else, so going to school and consequently, art felt like a chore.

Amidst my struggle, around late March, getting up the staircases at my school became a struggle and each time, my vision darkened and I needed to rest my head at my desk. Alarmed, my teacher advised me to go to the office where they called my mom, and she arranged to visit our family doctor that week. From there, I was sent to the ER and transferred to SickKids in Toronto, where after a mostly uneventful week or so of testing, I was officially diagnosed with Primary Mediastinal B-cell lymphoma, found in my lungs. Although I was in grief in the ER, it relieved me from my responsibilities and I was unusually calm the week afterward, even after going into anaphylactic shock before a fluid-draining procedure. Naively believing that was the worst it could get, I kept myself occupied with melty beads provided by the hospital and watched Food Network all day. Living in Markham, my parents would drive thirty minutes almost every day while I was in-patient, swapping shifts so someone could stay with me overnight. They also had to put their plans on hold, including a vacation that was originally that week to the U.S. With how busy they were, my younger brother was somewhat neglected, with my parents having no time to prepare him homemade meals or to help with schoolwork and I didn't see him except for weekend visits.

When treatment began, the first month was the worst of my life. The doctors told me what to expect as far as symptoms, but the steroids made it impossible for me to digest food, and for that time, it felt like I'd eaten concrete. Along with being almost bedridden, the non-stop

stomach pain dampened my appetite and I vomited up anything I ate. Occasionally, I picked up a pencil and paper but struggled to sit up for long. I missed experiencing a regular senior year—I couldn't find the strength to participate in school events, classes I'd looked forward to enrolling in, and had to hastily cut ties with my piano and art teacher who I'd known since childhood.

One afternoon, my mom had driven back home to prepare me dinner, and feeling more alive than usual, I'd decided to read a well-reviewed webcomic which I had been putting off starting because of school. *Nevermore* by Kit Trace and Kate Flynn, is a gothic-styled webcomic centering on Lenore and Annabelle Lee after death; now forcibly enrolled in Nevermore Academy, a mysterious place where they and countless others are forced to participate in a game, recall the details of their demise, acquire powerful ghost forms, and win a second chance at life. The contents of the story were irrelevant to mine, but it was mysterious with beautiful art, complicated characters, and a premise that had me captivated as I lay in bed, breezing through over a hundred chapters. For that day, it provided me comfort, let me escape to another world—I was passionate about the story, so much so that I sent a message online to the creators thanking them, which unfortunately, they couldn't receive.

Eventually, symptoms subsided as the chemo wore off, and I could leave to rest in the comfort of my own home. Every round of chemo was easier than the last but they all came with their unpleasant challenges; adjusting to a feeding tube, chemo burns on my palms and feet, getting active again, and lacking the ability to taste salt. Outside of the hospital, I felt isolated. My friends came to visit once, but couldn't spend time with me because of their demanding school schedules. In addition, as much as I appreciate my parents, they were terrified to let me go anywhere with people, and at a time when I should've been more independent, it made me feel restless. In times when it felt like my brain was going numb, I would check online for newly

updated chapters of *Nevermore*, looking for the comfort I found that first month again. It didn't change the fact that I was too sick to go to my graduation, or my prom, or that I was completely out of the loop for an art grant opportunity I desperately needed, but it was something to look forward to when things were hard. In August, I rang the bell—a nice celebration, but I was mostly glad that I could officially resume regular life again. Later in the fall, I started attending art classes again and drawing frequently, to which I noticed many of my sketches took small inspiration from the webcomic I'd read months ago. From drawing the characters themselves to little gothic touches. I realized all throughout my cancer journey, art was the only thing that gave me comfort, whether that be by consuming or creating it. What draws people into art is human connection, as behind every piece, you are aware there is a person who's written their own life experiences in between the lines—and when a person can relate to what it's trying to convey, the world feels a little less lonely. In a world where everything is terrible and unpredictable, *Nevermore* eased my loneliness and gave me something to look forward to—one of the most valuable things life can offer.

While I intend to eventually study animation, I hope to one day work as a graphic novel illustrator and publish a graphic novel of my own one day; I want to create something that brings comfort to someone else, the way my favourite stories do for me. While I am currently in OCAD U's Illustration program, this following year, I intend to apply to Sheridan's Animation program and various others, as I want to get into a program focused more on fundamentals and the business side of the industry. While I hadn't discovered OPACC until recently, I would be extremely grateful if I received the scholarship; if I move to one of the schools of my choice, the scholarship money would help to pay off the increased cost of my tuition, living expenses, or school materials. Even without getting accepted, it would still help me in those mentioned ways

at OCAD and get me closer to my goal of creating. I'm terrified all the time of what will happen after post-secondary, but even if I'm hit with failure after failure, I still want to create.