

My Survivor Story

Two, zero, one, three: These numbers can mean a great many things. Maybe it's your code to your iphone, a locker combination, or maybe your lucky number. For me, 2013 was one of the most significant of my life because that is the year that changed everything. I was five years old when I was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) or as I like to call it, "The Blood Cancer". My days went from doing arts and crafts at my Montessori school to breathing in the sweet, almost comforting strawberry anesthesia in Cujo's room at SickKids. My parents did their best to keep me away from sugar, but the aftertaste from the anesthesia was so dreadful, that the only thing that kept me sane was sucking on a sugary gummy Life Saver that my mother would hand me when I regained consciousness. Looking back now as a young adult, the things that felt like miniature moments, such as the taste of anesthesia or a mouthwatering candy, were once-upon-a-time moments that felt as though the pain was never-ending.

Although I was only five years old, my cancer story left me with many vivid memories that I still carry today. It feels like dunking my head in Dumbledore's magic bowl of memories, looking back at the cancer treatments that I wish didn't have to happen at all. I can still remember the fear I felt when four nurses had to hold me down just for a silly nasal swab or the anxiety that built up on my drive up to SickKids for the petrifying butterfly poke. Like many five year old girls, I was a huge fan of Disney princesses; I obsessed over Ariel because she lived in a magical underwater world, and Rapunzel inspired me with her calling for adventure and especially her beautiful long hair. The day I woke up one morning and looked down at my pillow to see pieces of my dark brown hair stuck to my pillowcase, I didn't feel anything like a Disney princess. I felt different, embarrassed and disconnected from other kids my age. At that moment, I felt like my whole world had fallen apart.

Everything began to shift one morning when my mom gave me the news that I'd be going away to summer camp in Muskoka for two weeks. My initial feeling was fear because I didn't want to leave my family and be sent to an unfamiliar place. Little did I know that this place was one that I could call home. Camp Ooch, now called Campfire Circle, became a place where I could truly be myself without any fear or judgement. I have met many wonderful people who understand exactly what I have been through and who share the same emotions, struggles and fear as I do. Opening campfire is always heartwarming because it brings everyone together, especially when our camp director gives us the famous spiel about rules at camp. In all honesty, the first night is always special because it's the moment our cabin bonds, stories are told, and we realize we're not alone. It's not a requirement, tradition or something that's mandatory, it's just a safe space where all us kids can speak about our story with people who understand and empathize. Camp has allowed me to grow as a person and I keep the memories I've made very close to my heart. While Campfire Circle gave me a sense of belonging and connection, it has shown me the value and importance of having a strong support system.

While I was introduced to communities that gave me a sense of belonging and support, Ontario Parents Advocating for Children with Cancer (OPACC) was how we came to know about these opportunities such as Campfire Circle. Having your child go through an unimaginable event in their life is definitely an impossible situation for a parent. During my SickKids appointments there were always volunteers around interacting with families in the waiting rooms. Eventually, my parents became familiar with OPACC; John and Susan gave our family the support system that we didn't know we needed, and they introduced us to many other parents who were navigating through the same journey. Instead of feeling consumed by the feeling of fear and hopelessness, they've created a community to help and support each other through hard times. OPACC has generously given me so much over the years such as my favourite giant teddy bear who I named Oso Grande which means Big Bear in my second language, Spanish. They even introduced us to Million Dollar Smiles who organized a memorable birthday party where I got to invite all my friends to have a relaxing spa day. Most of all they gave my family and me the strength and the feeling of being grounded in the midst of chaos, and for that I am eternally grateful. During the years of my treatment, my parents began volunteering with OPACC as a way to help raise awareness and support what this grass roots organization offers. As a family we participated in fundraising activities, and in particular The Inside Ride in 2015 and 2016. We were able to register multiple teams from family, friends and my parents' colleagues who worked hard to collectively raise well over \$20,000 and as a bonus, get some well needed exercise at the same time!

Over the years, I've spent a lot of time reflecting on my past and how my journey has made an impact on who I am today. I've come to accept that overcoming Leukemia is something that will always be a part of me. I've learned to open up about my journey to those who are close to me and embrace my identity of being a survivor. When I share my story, I like to express my two perspectives, because as the 18th-century idiom expresses, there are two sides to every story. On one side, there is hopelessness, pain and fear and on the other side, there is perseverance, strength and courage. Being able to understand both sides of my journey has not only shaped who I am, but has guided me towards the path that I am passionate to pursue. I will be attending Wilfred Laurier University to study business and eventually make my way to law school, where I can use the resilience and perspective I've obtained to advocate for others. Receiving this scholarship from OPACC would not only ease the financial burden on my family, but it would also allow me to fully focus on my education and continue working towards the goals that my journey has inspired me to set.

Looking back at my childhood as the eighteen-year-old I am today, I've come to realize that the years that defined my life as fearful and filled with uncertainty, has actually become the very foundation of who I am right now. What once felt like a nightmare has transformed into the lesson that taught me resilience, strength and perspective which I would not have been able to learn the way I did if I grew up like every other five year old. What once felt like endless fear has turned into a purpose, a reason for me to set high goals and strive to be the best version of myself possible. As I move forward into my future, I will use my story not only as a reminder of

how far I've come, but a way to advocate and guide others through their own challenges. The year 2013 may have changed my life forever, but I don't look back at it as a weakness, I view it as the reason I'm the strongest version of myself today.