Though I was young when my sister was first diagnosed with cancer, it was immediately clear to me that it was something that would change my entire life. As time went on and her treatments continued, every aspect of my life was impacted by childhood cancer and I have become very motivated to help others in similar situations by using my experiences and skills.

My family's childhood cancer journey began in October 2012, when my sister, Sarah, was diagnosed with high risk acute lymphoblastic leukaemia at SickKids Hospital. She was three years old when she was diagnosed, and her treatment lasted until she was six. We didn't have to worry much about cancer for just over a year, until Sarah's routine blood tests showed that her cancer had returned. This time, she had chemotherapy, total body radiation and a bone marrow transplant. Sarah finished her second treatment after about a year without many complications. Months after finishing her second treatment, when Sarah was nine, her cancer came back again. She was one of the first few children to be able to have CAR-T cell therapy at SickKids. It put Sarah into remission again, but her cancer came back again when she was ten. For Sarah's fourth cancer treatment, she had chemotherapy, immunotherapy, and a stem cell transplant. Sarah's transplant caused extremely rare complications that required intense additional treatments and caused permanent damage. Months after her transplant, Sarah was receiving treatments for the complications when her blood tests showed that she had cancer a fifth time. Sarah had several rounds of chemotherapy and immunotherapy. Sarah's cancer came back again shortly afterwards, and Sarah was put on bridging chemo as there were no other treatment options. After almost a year of bridging chemo, Sarah had a re-infusion of her CAR-T cells, which put her into remission again. A few months later, Sarah's cancer came back as a mass compressing her spinal cord. She was treated with chemotherapy and targeted radiation therapy. Sarah's cancer came back six months later, while she was still on treatment. She was treated with more chemotherapy and craniospinal radiation. Sarah’s cancer came back again a couple months later, days before her sixteenth birthday. Sarah had life-threatening complications from the chemotherapy that she received in an attempt to control her cancer. It has now been over five months since her last relapse, and her cancer is still not under control. We are now hoping for success from a possible upcoming trial, and Sarah will likely be the first child to ever receive this treatment. It is unlikely we will ever find a treatment that can put Sarah into remission forever, but we are hoping to give her good days without constant cancer treatments for whatever time she may have left.

Childhood cancer has greatly impacted every aspect of my life, from my daily routines and habits, to my life goals. My education is something that has been greatly impacted by childhood cancer in many ways. Sarah’s cancer has made it extremely difficult for me to keep up in many parts of my schoolwork, since I had numerous absences to help or to be with my family during difficult parts of treatment, and did not have much extra time to complete homework outside of school. Contrarily, childhood cancer has increased my motivation to have academic success and to work hard to achieve my goals. Succeeding academically allowed me to feel as though my life didn’t always have to be controlled by cancer, and that I could still be successful despite so many added challenges. Another way childhood cancer impacted my life was through my high school job at Stevenson Memorial Hospital. Childhood cancer gave me the experience I needed to thrive in a hospital environment when working with other staff and with patients. It also gave me a strong understanding of how the patients and families may have been feeling, so I could be as understanding and as helpful as possible while also completing all of my work. Cancer also forced me to mature quickly and behave more like an adult while my peers got to continue living like most other children. After Sarah’s diagnosis, I was initially moved around between houses of extended family members while my parents cared for my very sick sister. As her treatments continued, I was given more of a choice to be involved in Sarah’s care. I preferred this option, as it allowed me to be with my family, but it also meant I had to see Sarah when she was extremely sick and I had to be around as other people lost their children or siblings to cancer in the room next door. As I got older, I became very involved with her treatments. By the time I was eleven, I was independently preparing her at-home blood product infusions and helping with her needles. When I was thirteen, I navigated the unplanned admission process on my own, as Sarah and I were with our grandparents who were unfamiliar with what to do in the case of neutropenic fever. As time went on, I started noticing when things were about to go wrong, even before my parents; for example, I noticed the slight yellowing of her eyes as her liver started to fail and I noticed her extra fatigue right before she couldn’t breathe on her own due to pneumocystis pneumonia. When Sarah started high school at the same school as me, I took on additional responsibilities to help support her outside of my class times. Then, after getting my driver’s license in my last year of high school, I started taking Sarah to many of her outpatient appointments by myself so she could get blood tests and transfusions, and my parents could go to work. Sarah also started choosing me as her post-op support person in recovery after anesthetic procedures. While these have all been important experiences, they have also taken up a lot of time and given me many extra challenges.

OPACC has helped my family in many different ways, mainly by offering various supports and opportunities to make good memories despite having challenges with childhood cancer. OPACC has provided my family with financial support for parking and through gift cards to help cover the costs of food and other expenses. This has always been especially helpful since my parents have both had to spend so much time off work to care for my sister. Additionally, they have provided resources for support while navigating cancer. The most significant part of

OPACC’s support for me has been the tickets for events to make good memories with my sister while she has been sick and on treatment, especially since she has been on active treatment for almost her entire life. The support they provide for my parents has also been important, as it allows them to be able to focus more on our family than just the challenges of childhood cancer.

For as long as I can remember, I have had a goal to work in pediatric healthcare to help sick children in some way. Currently, my career goal is to work in pediatric physiotherapy to help children maximize their mobility that may be limited due to childhood cancer or another childhood illness or injury. This is important to me because Sarah’s cancer treatments took away her mobility and it brought our family great amounts of happiness when we found some way to get some of it back. I have recently completed my first year of an undergraduate kinesiology degree at McMaster University, and I am working towards finishing my degree and hopefully pursuing further education for a Masters of Physiotherapy. This scholarship can help me to achieve these goals, since it will allow me to continue to pay for my education. Additionally, I live in student housing away from my family while I attend university, and I face the additional costs of using public transit to frequently visit my sister while she receives care at SickKids Hospital. Currently, my parents’ ability to financially support me throughout my education is greatly limited as they are both off work to care for my sister, and there are many additional costs associated with her care, gas prices, food costs, and the costs of living away from home during her treatments. Childhood cancer is a major source of motivation for my education, but it also results in so many additional challenges that make it difficult for me to get the education necessary to achieve my goals.

Childhood cancer has taught me a lot over the twelve and a half years Sarah has been fighting her multiple relapsed leukaemia, and it has motivated me to find ways to help other sick children make the most out of their lives. I am confident that my past and future experiences with Sarah’s cancer will provide me with a unique level of understanding that will allow me to positively contribute to the lives of other sick children in the future.