

OPACC Scholarship Essay
Victoria Werocy

I still remember the day, three years ago, when my parents walked in with a car seat in hand and with tears in my eyes I met my baby brother for the first time. The one who I longed for for nine long months. One year ago, I was standing in front of the same doorway I welcomed my baby brother home two years ago, but only then it was my step dad who walked through that door, and with him he carried in the news that my two year old brother has been diagnosed with b-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

I don't think I'll ever forget that day, everything that seemed big and important in my life; friends, school, career, job, seemed so small. The only thing that mattered was that I needed to do everything for him to get better, and to be there for my family. The drive from school to SickKids suddenly became my norm, I was there every free minute I had. Many aspects of my life ceased to exist the first few months my brother became sick, I had started putting my school work off to the side, I didn't have close friends to talk to and I was terrified what the lengthy journey of cancer treatment would look like. The first few months felt like a blur, it was like my family and I were in complete survival mode, just trying to get through the day and hoping my brother would be stable. My brother who is now three has taught me so much about my own life. He has taught me that I can get over my fears and that I can be brave, just like he is when he gets his port accessed or when he has to get his LP. I had the opportunity last summer to go to Rome for the Jubilee year with my local youth group. I didn't sign up to go because I was scared. I was scared to be away from him and my family, and even though my brother's cancer diagnosis brought optimism in my life it also brought fear. I ended up going because I found that strength from my brother, knowing that if he knew I wasn't going because of him, if he could tell me he 100% would say "Go to Rome and bring me back some chocolate", which is exactly what I did. The experience was hard, and uncomfortable but also extremely rewarding. I made memories I'll remember forever and grew friendships that will last a

lifetime. I was living every aspect of that trip for myself and for my brother. I got to help him by living my own life and being a good older sister for him.

My brother's cancer journey has been enduring and still continues to be, but one of the most rewarding things in my life is getting to watch him grow up. Getting to see him be braver, funnier and kinder every day. Many parts of my family's life have also changed, my mom who is the strongest person I know has been his main caretaker from the start of his cancer journey. Every medication, every fever, every hospital visit or extensive stay, she is there. She's shown strength beyond imagination and our family is held together by her. My family also loves to travel. We've gone on roadtrips to Washington DC, Boston, New Brunswick, PEI, the list goes on. But with my brother's diagnosis our world became much smaller, we haven't been able to go far or really anywhere as he needs to be close to a hospital in case of an emergency. My family and I long for when we can get back on the road together and explore new parts of the world. OPACC has supported my family tremendously in the meantime by providing reimbursement for parking during hospital visits and stays, gift cards for groceries and entertainment tickets, like a puppet show which my brother absolutely loved. They brought back small moments of joy and hope back into our lives. OPACC is an organization that sheds light in the lives of my family members, they're not only there to help my brother but also there to help all of us affected by his diagnosis. It feels as though this journey that is frightening, unknown and lonely can be transformed into a journey of community and supporting one another. OPACC is a huge help to my family and I am certain that they will be part of our whole journey of cancer, including after, they have taught all of us that it is okay to ask for help, and that there are many people willing to lend a hand.

I am currently going into my fourth year at York University, where I am earning an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a Minor in Health Policy Management. My journey of education has been anything but linear, my second year, when my brother got diagnosed, was especially difficult. I have always felt a sense of need to help others and I have been volunteering since I was 14, and currently volunteer for a camp called Campfire Circle, which has also transformed

the lives of my family members, me, and my brother. This scholarship means more to me than just the dollar sign, it's an opportunity for me to continue to learn and grow academically and to achieve the goal of being a psychologist. This scholarship will be an extremely helpful aid to pay for my schooling. With my mom being off from work to care for my brother and the various additional financial payments associated with my brother's treatment it is very hard for her to fully support my tuition. With my undergraduate degree coming to an end I will also start preparing for my masters, which I plan to do right after I graduate. This scholarship will give me the opportunity to finish my degree off strong and to have courage to move onto the next chapter of my life, where I hope to help others around me and provide support.

My brother's cancer journey will leave a print on my life forever. He has taught me to work hard and to live my life fully and to not be scared of the unknown but be curious about what it can bring. He has taught me that it is just as important to give back as it is to be given kindness and support. I have found that volunteering with Campfire Circle and thinking about how I can help children in my future profession has helped me cope with his sickness. Day by day we are closer to the finish line, and I can picture him ringing that bell that indicates the long and hard journey he has completed. OPACC has given me hope, support and memories that I've made with my brother that will last a lifetime. My brother is very young, and although he may not remember most of his cancer journey, the imprint he has left in my heart and in my life is something I will carry with me every single day.