OPACC Sibling Scholarship Application 2026 - Abby Acosta-Pickering

With the way that eyes widen and jaws drop when the word “cancer” is uttered, you'd think the word itself is some kind of curse. Misconception in any topic is normal; I’ve come to find out that there sure is a lot of it when it comes to cancer, especially childhood cancer. Even though these mutations are very rare, most people know at least one person who’s battled the disease. Most times that means a grandparent, uncle, family friend, pet, or someone distant; you never really think that someone close to you could get cancer. Like most, I never considered that it would affect anyone close to me, much less my 7-year old brother.

Cancer and “healthy” aren’t anywhere close to synonymous, which is why nobody could have thought that my well-nourished and constantly active brother, Ollie, could have this disease. A million things *could have* been the reason as to why my “healthy” brother was sick, but what I’ve accepted is that sometimes bad things happen and you can’t control why they do. What you can control is how you deal with these bad things. Which is why I watched my parents fight almost as much as my brother did to make sure that their son had a chance. My brother experienced things that no 2nd grader should be faced with - while everyone else was learning how to spell, he was puking from his last round of chemotherapy. My brother might have to be reminded how to spell the word “scared”, but he is in his school’s gifted program and he sure is the most resilient person I have ever met.

Ollie was diagnosed in November of 2019, which happened to be my 6th grade year. Before all the tests and hospital visits there was the “bump”, which appeared in August of 2019. Picture this, two siblings brushing their teeth over one bathroom sink. The older sister sees a red irritated patch of skin on her younger brother’s neck; she deems it a sun burn. This inductive reasoning fits because last summer the little brother got terribly burned at skateboard camp (which he had attended again that current summer). She alerts her parents and they make the promise to monitor it. Well then the bump grows, and grows, until a doctor’s appointment is mandatory. The little brother goes to the pediatrician, he’s seen by another doctor because his usual one is unavailable. It’s a bacterial infection. He gets antibiotics and takes them as prescribed. He throws up a dark red substance (mixed berry smoothie) along with stomach bile in the kitchen sink. Spoiler alert: this wasn’t a bacterial infection. This moment was not only the gateway to many CHEO visits, but how I earned my impending fear of vomit, because it was this very moment that led 11 year old me to believe that the red substance left over in our sink was from my baby brother yakking blood.

Biopsy day, November 11th 2019. I wrote Ollie a note, “I’m sure it’s not a tumor”, was among the lines I wrote. This was me trying to be optimistic, I truly didn’t know any better. A week later: result day, I go to school with knots in my stomach. I hear my name on the announcements, I go down to the office, my mom is there. We drove around, stopping on a side street. I remember the look on my mom’s face and I remember hearing the word “cancer”, then

completely zoning out. The next thing I remember was my mom telling me to be kind to my brother when we got home. For the rest of that night I was superglued to his side.

As I mentioned before, people have no clue how to react when cancer is brought up. I remember going to school knowing my mom had told the mothers of my close friends. What she had said to me was that it was my choice who I shared this information with but that it was always better to "start a rumor yourself". When I stepped off the bus, I knew there would be questions. I did not know that a boy in the other 6th grade class would come up to me to share his thoughts on the matter. "Abby, I'm sorry that your brother is going to die." is what he said. It then occurred to me that most see cancer as a death sentence. I ran to the bathroom and sobbed my little eyes out until the bell rang. I now knew that in my case I needed to spark the rumor myself so people knew that Ollie had cancer but that I would not be handing out funeral invitations anytime soon.

What I saw from my community is what truly makes this story special. Everybody in my life came to support my family, even complete strangers. Within tragedy, we were able to find comfort in the fact that we were not alone. Families on the oncology ward felt like friends but also teammates, because we were all fighting for the people we loved. I need to make it clear that recovery is not a linear process, we met people whose journey was months long, some that were years, and others who had battles that spanned decades. For Ollie, recovery was like a tsunami. He was in remission, then relapsed, then went blind, then was in remission again, then was supposed to get a stem cell transplant, then COVID-19 hit and I was the unexpected donor. This stem cell transplant seemed like the light at the end of the tunnel. In the middle of the pandemic we moved about 6 hours away to Toronto so I could donate at Sick Kids Hospital, where Ollie was supposed to be a recipient on April 16th, 2020. Long story short the process was not that easy and we found out that Ollie had relapsed again, meaning we had to start the whole recovery process over.

During our brief first endeavor at Sick Kids, my mother and Ollie stayed on the 8th floor Oncology Ward where they found comfort in the OPACC Parent Liaison Program. This is where they found their Toronto pediatric cancer community. This event may seem small in contrast to others described, but being able to hang around other families with lived experience and receiving little gifts of comfort, made the hospital seem a little less scary which made all the difference to a seven year old going through the unimaginable. Since moving back to Ottawa, our family has still been impacted by OPACC. OPACC and KidsUpFront have frequently given us tickets to local events which has led us to experiencing "normal" family bonding once again, a privilege that I am ever so grateful for knowing that there was a time when I didn't know if I'd get to do these things with my brother again.

In July of 2020, Ollie's story officially became a success story. During this time, he received his stem cell transplant and has since consistently maintained 100% chimerism with no adverse side effects. It's necessary to mention that cancer will be something that follows my family and I for the rest of our lives. Ollie was left blind after his first relapse. Although he has not let this stunt his progression into the wonderful human being he is today, it is a physical reminder of all the trauma he had to endure from a young age. The rest of us have scars too, although ours are not from chemo ports, or procedures. Ours are emotional and ones you couldn't see if you didn't know our story. This is why I believe survivor stories from all perspectives are so vital to our understanding of the complexities of cancer. I cannot detach myself from being the sister of a cancer survivor and I do not want to - Ollie's success story is part of my success story.

I am Ollie's sister, but I am also Abby. Who "Abby" is, I am still figuring out. In fall of 2026, I will be heading off to University. Where that will be, I have not decided yet. What I do know is that I want to use whatever degree I earn to help others. I am currently interested in teaching or the idea of becoming a psychologist, and I do really believe that this idea has come from all the support I received from my 6th grade teachers and various mental health professionals at CHEO. With this scholarship, I will be able to afford books and additional materials that are not covered by other means of financial aid. Most importantly, this scholarship has given me the opportunity to get my story out. I hope that this reaches a sister, or a cousin, a friend, a parent, quite frankly anyone who is dealing with the effects of a battle with cancer, and that they know that they are not alone and that they can survive it too.