

My Longest Service Project

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Towards the end of my sophomore year, while watching the local news, I saw a news story about young teenagers who decided to grow their hair to long lengths in order to donate it to those who can no longer grow their hair. Companies such as Locks of Love and Patine use the hair of young men and women to make wigs for women who've undergone cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, which causes the patient to lose their hair over a short two to four-week period. Listening to the accounts of these women, who had regained their confidence from the teens' wigs made me feel a need to help those who hadn't received a wig yet. Admittedly I thought it would be a great way for me to gain service hours for my school as well. I've generally always had short hair; it was just my natural style, but when I started thinking about growing my hair to donate, my imagination wandered. I began to wonder how the opposite side, the patients, felt. Essentially my main reasoning was to help someone who had gone through something as life-changing as cancer. I was curious about what those women were going through because I couldn't relate to their hardships. I had never had someone close to me go through an illness as severe as cancer.

A year of growing, cutting, and donating later, on a seemingly meaningless day, I heard my father call from the downstairs with a deep and slow voice, "Can you please come down and talk to your mother and me?" My first thought was, "Oh God, what did I do?" quietly I made my way downstairs, my brain listing everything I could have possibly done wrong but nothing coming to mind. I sat down next to my mother with my dad watching a few feet away as she explained "I don't know how to say this but earlier this month I was diagnosed with stage four

metastatic liver cancer” as tears formed from her eyes the realization set in. She had taken me to get my haircut, knowing she had terminal cancer. She had kept that in for so long not knowing when to tell me about her diagnosis, that’s when I broke down.

I couldn’t think of anything to say, there was no logical solution to this problem. My mind raced through things I could do but nothing came to mind so I cried. Crying was the only thing I could think to do. I don’t show emotions in this way very often, but with no other feelings except fear and sadness, the tears flooded my eyes and poured down my face. I had no prior experience with cancer except with movies and television shows. I knew “stage four” meant her condition was bad-really bad and I was afraid. I started muttering “I’m sorry” through my gasps of air, as that was the only logical thing to say. My parents embraced me and cried with me. Even though my parents reassured me that things would be all right, hugging me tightly with all their love and telling me that we would make it through this hardship like any other “as a family”, somewhere deep down I would realize that I would see my mother pass away. At that point, I had decided that I would need to make her the proudest mother before she would leave my dad and me.

During my mother’s battle with cancer, my dad bought her a necklace with two boxing gloves. The doctor told my mother, “you’ll need to get ready to fight this” after her diagnosis with stage four liver cancer. This was also my junior year of high school. It was the hardest school year I’ve ever encountered, both academically and emotionally. My junior year of high school consisted of struggling emotionally while having to keep up with my studies and extracurricular activities. By my mother’s request, no one was allowed to know about her condition other than family and close friends. My mother was a strong woman. During her chemo treatments, she kept working and tried her hardest to keep everything as normal as

possible. I dug myself into a hole of depression. With the need to make my mother proud, I buried myself into textbooks and never came up for air. I spent hours stressing about school and my mother's health which always collided on the same days. When I scored a 40% on a chemistry test my mom's chemo stopped working. Unaware, I vented to her about my problems: being "a failure and a disappointment" even though my grade was still acceptable, she should have been my number one priority. Later when I'd gotten a surprise A on an Algebra II test, I found out on the ride home that surprisingly the clinical trial, which she was the perfect subject for, ceased working and there was nothing else she could do but revert back to chemo. Though at the time it seemed bleak, there were also good points. One of these was winning student council president for my senior year after campaigning all year. This achievement also fell on the same day as my mother's move into Hospice. I look back with joy on telling her I had won and her weak response, "I knew you would" as she laid back in her bed. In retrospect, part of me wishes I hadn't put so much effort into being a top student at that time, but deep down I know it was the only thing I could do to help her and make her proud- except give her my love.

Her condition never improved throughout my junior year, she only got worse. She had chemo on Wednesdays. The steroids made her feel as though she was on top of the world on Thursday and Friday. But when the weekend rolled around, I had to help her with all that I could to ensure that she was comfortable. I loved her with all my being and had no problem with taking care of her when she was home, but seeing someone who was once so strong and full of life not be able to get up from the couch was a heartbreaking sight. Even simply writing this essay I find it difficult not tearing up with memories of my mother, but I know that she'd want me to be strong. She'd want me to survive and thrive even with the hardships I've lived through life and the many troubles I've had to push through like this.

The boxing gloves around my mother's (now my) neck is a symbol of my mother and her metaphorical boxing match with cancer. I've learned that life will never be easy; there is no safe way around the obstacles you'll face, so you need to strap on your boxing gloves and get ready to fight. I've also realized that the small things are irrelevant compared to the rigors of life. Sure my junior year grades mattered to me back then, but now it seems so insignificant in comparison to the other things going on in my life now, and I know that the important things now will be trivial down the road. I find it ironic that my mom never lost her hair or needed a wig during her chemo. I'm still glad I decided to donate my hair during my sophomore year. I hope the person who received my hair fought hard against cancer, like my mother, and won.